

Sermon for the Feast of St. Mary, Mother of God, observed Wednesday, August 16, 2017
Immanuel Lutheran Church, Alexandria, Virginia ✕ Rev. Peter J. Eckardt

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The last mention in the Scriptures of the Blessed Virgin Mary is in the first chapter of Acts, where the eleven apostles are gathered in the upper room, and St. Luke records: **“These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.”**

The mother of Jesus was present with the apostles on the Day of Pentecost, and she prayed and worshiped with them. And that is about as much as the Holy Ghost wished for us to know for certain concerning the life of the Virgin Mary after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. We’re not told whether she stayed in Jerusalem or traveled abroad. We’re not told how long she lived, what she did, or how she died. From St. Luke’s Gospel, we surmise that she may have spent time with the evangelist, recounting to him the events surrounding the conception and birth of Jesus, for he records a number of things concerning Mary that the other evangelists do not: her Visitation of Elizabeth, her song the Magnificat, Jesus’ circumcision and presentation in the temple, and the story of Jesus as a boy teaching the elders. From John’s Gospel we know that Mary was there at the foot of the cross when Jesus died, and that Jesus entrusted her into the care of that beloved disciple. This is what Scripture teaches, and it is from Scripture alone, *sola Scriptura*, that we derive all doctrine for our faith and life as Christians.

The Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches claim to know a whole lot more about the Blessed Virgin Mary. There are numerous accounts and legends that have been passed down through the centuries, have developed in different ways, and have been codified. But none of these accounts has the authority of Scripture. Most of them date from the fifth and sixth centuries or later. And yet, because these churches have a very different view of the authority of Scripture—for they consider Tradition, and the Pope’s infallibility in the case of Rome, to be equal in authority and weight—they regard these stories and legends as undeniable truths. Thus, for them this feast which we celebrate tonight is in commemoration of the “Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary” into heaven. There are variances in the tradition, but in general these churches teach that Mary did die—and that the Apostles were all miraculously transported to her side at her death (except for Thomas who was delayed)—and that on the third day after her death, they found her grave empty with a sweet-smelling aroma, for she had been assumed into heaven.

Now, you might think this is a bizarre teaching with zero credibility, or you might find yourself persuaded by some of the reasoning behind it, you might think it a fascinating legend, or you might wonder why it matters at all. And if the differences in teaching here between these churches and ours *only* pertained to the circumstances of Mary’s death, whether her body awaits the resurrection in the grave or whether God chose to bring her body into heaven ahead of time as He did with Enoch and Elijah—if that’s all this were about—then truly it wouldn’t make much of a difference at all, and we might rightly consider this an indifferent matter.

But that’s not all this is about. There is instead real danger in what else these churches teach about Mary. The danger comes in their teaching that when she was assumed into heaven, she was

crowned Queen of Heaven and given command over the holy angels, and that to her we can and should pray for deliverance from the evil one. The danger comes in invoking Mary as our "Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix," as the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church does. The danger comes in the confession that she was without original sin by virtue of her immaculate conception and that she was united with Christ *in the work of salvation*, and that by *consenting* to the Incarnation she is our "Co-Redeemer." The danger comes in praying to her for mediation or help; it comes in adoring or venerating her beyond what is right for any created being. These teachings are all directly contrary to what Holy Scripture teaches, they are threats to saving faith, and they are to be anathema because they deny the salvation wrought for *all* mankind, including the Blessed Virgin, by Jesus Christ alone, our one and only Mediator and Redeemer.

And yet, it *is* good and right that we *honor* the Virgin Mary and that we call her blessed, indeed, that we regard her as the *most blessed* among women. Why? Not because she was without sin (she wasn't), but because she was chosen to be the mother of God, to give birth to, nurture and raise the eternal Logos. Not because she is our mediator and co-redeemer (she isn't), but because she gives us a most beautiful picture of humility, obedience, and devotion. Not because she is queen of heaven and all the angels (she isn't), but because she teaches us by example how to magnify the Lord with all her soul.

"Blessed is she who believed," Elizabeth proclaimed by the Holy Spirit, **"who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."** That is why we call Mary blessed, because of her faith in the Word of God. Perhaps more than anyone else in the New Testament, Mary is portrayed to us again and again as the model believer, a picture of the faithful, an image even of the holy Christian Church itself.

When the angel announced to this young maiden the most unbelievable prediction and how it would impact Mary's own life, she replied with words we would do well to imitate: **"Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to Thy word."** When the Lord Jesus taught Mary and Joseph that He must be about His Father's business, Mary didn't argue with what she didn't understand, but **"kept all these sayings in her heart;"** she treasured the Word of Christ as we all must do. When she was concerned for the bridal party at the wedding of Canaan that they had run out of wine, she showed us not only compassion but how to bring our petitions before the Lord, simply stating the need and trusting that He will act out of the goodness and mercy of His heart. **"They have no wine,"** she said simply, and when Jesus seemed uninterested in helping, she turned to the servants and said with complete confidence, **"Whatever He says unto you, do it."** And when our Lord was sighing, dying, on the accursed tree for the sin of all mankind, she did not leave His side, but showed us true devotion to the Crucified One, ever eager to follow where He leads and to receive what He bestows. And when He had ascended into heaven, her devotion did not waver, for she remained in complete accord and fidelity with the teaching and prayers of the Apostles. This is what Scripture teaches, and these are the reasons we do well to honor and bless St. Mary.

May the Lord God grant us grace to follow the good example of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary in humility, obedience, faith, and devotion, and may He bring us at the last, with St. Mary and all the apostles, martyrs, saints, and faithful departed unto Himself in heaven, *only* by the merits and mediation of His Son Our Lord Jesus Christ, to Whom be all glory and honor, with the Father and the Spirit, forever and ever. Amen.