

FORTY DAYS AFTER PASCHA, the resurrected Christ ascended into heaven. This is recorded in Acts 1:3. According to Luke's gospel and the Book of Acts, our Lord's departure took place on the Mount of Olives, near Bethany. It should be noted that the Mount of Olives is a Sabbath's day journey from Jerusalem, that is, the distance a Jew was permitted to walk on the day of the Sabbath. Ecumenius writes, «A Sabbath day's journey is one mile in length, as Clement says in his fifth Stromatis; it is two thousand cubits, as the Interpretation of the Acts states.» They draw this conclusion from the fact that, while they were in the wilderness, the Israelites of old kept within this distance from the Holy Tabernacle, where they walked on the Sabbath day to worship God.

Despite the separation, the apostles are full of joy, the services of the Ascension, although they conclude the glorious paschal season, express this same joy.

*Clap your hands, all peoples!
Shout to God with loud songs of joy!
God has gone up with a shout
the Lord with the sound of a trumpet.*

Having reached the day of the Ascension, we are meant to understand that this event is the fulfillment of Christ's passion, the final moment of His life on earth, «the crowning of the paschal mystery».

Ascension and the Incarnation

On the icon of the Ascension, we see the Theotokos at the center of the group of apostles. Between the glorified Christ and the Virgin is a straight line, which forms the axis of the composition. This image teaches us that the Ascension is the summit of the incarnation, for today the material body of Christ, woven in the womb of the Virgin, rises to heaven to reign on the throne of God with the Father and the Spirit.

Arising into heaven in the body, Christ places our humanity at the right hand of God, our humanity which He has divinized in His person, for He is both God and man.

Without leaving the bosom of the Father, You share our humanity on earth, O sweetest Jesus. Today You ascend to heaven in glory from the Mount of Olives, in your compassion raising our fallen nature to place it with yourself at the right hand of the Father. The bodiless powers in heaven are struck with fear and amazement and glorify your love for

mankind; with them we on earth glorify your condescension for us and your ascension, and we say: «O Lord, Who fill your disciples and the mother who gave you birth with ineffable joy, by their prayers grant us also the joy of your elect and the grace of salvation.» Sticheron at Psalm 140

As this prayer shows us, Christ has never ceased to sit in glory by the Father and the Holy Spirit. In His divine nature, He is the Son «consubstantial to the Father» (of the same nature, essence), «Light of light, true God of true God.» He is without beginning and reigns from eternity, from before the creation of the cosmos, with the Father and the Spirit.

In His human nature, however, he has entered into the created world and lived on earth in historical time. Ascension is the day of His entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven with His body. For the first time in history, human nature ascends into the heavenly realm – soon to be followed by that of His blessed mother who after her Dormition ascended into heaven in the body and shares the glory of her Son. With His glorious ascent, Christ grants us a victory which has no precedent, for the ascension is accomplished in the flesh, showing that Christ is truly incarnate. His incarnation is not a mere appearance, He did not simply borrow a body for a short period of time. This body of His is quite real, and in Him the two nature of Christ, human and divine, are united. «*For in Him the whole fullness of divinity dwells bodily*» [Col. 2:9]. These words of Saint Paul mean that Christ is fully God and fully man, having divinized His body. This body was taken up into heaven and is, ever since, «seated at the right hand of the God» [Mk 16:19]

Pray for Meriam

May 22, 2014

«Reflections in Christ» by Fr. Daniel C. Kovalak.

Archpriest Daniel is rector of Holy Cross Church, Williamsport, PA and a frequent contributor to the Williamsport Sun-Gazette and other publications.

«...for once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light, (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true)» *Ephesians 5:8-9*

Here's a widely-reported and very troubling "breaking news" story from today's headlines. It's about a 27-year-old woman in Sudan, Meriam Ibrahim. She was born to a Muslim father and an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian mother. Her father abandoned the home when she was a young child. Nevertheless, in Sudan, children

are expected to follow the religion of their fathers. Three years ago, Meriam married a professing Christian man and about a year later gave birth to a son. She's now expecting another child and is eight-plus months pregnant.

Sudanese law prohibits women from marrying non-Muslims, although men can marry whomever they want without any penalty whatsoever. So on May 11, 2014 (ironically Mothers' Day) Meriam was convicted of apostasy for rejecting Islam and was given four days to recant, which would save her life.

But unlike countless others who've faced similar sentences in Sudan and elsewhere, she refused to renounce her faith and convert to Islam. After four days, on May 15, she appeared again before the court and declared openly and emphatically: **"I am a Christian, and I will remain a Christian."**

In response, Judge Abbas Khalifa pronounced his verdict. "I sentence you to be hanged to death." As if this weren't horrific enough, Meriam was also convicted by the court of committing "zena"—an implication of adultery for marrying a non-Muslim. And for this alleged crime, she was also sentenced to receive 100 lashes—before the imposition of the sentence of hanging!

Currently, with her 18-month-old son and the child in her womb, Meriam remains shackled in a prison, awaiting the carrying-out of the sentences. Ibrahim's husband said he's utterly distraught over the sentence and is fervently praying that it be somehow overturned.

Human rights groups worldwide have condemned the sentence, characterizing it as "heinous" and "abhorrent." Amnesty International calls it "a flagrant breach of international human rights law."

The U.S. National Security Council issued a statement, saying: "We continue to urge Sudan to fulfill its constitutional promise of religious freedom, and to respect the fundamental freedoms and universal human rights of all its people." And a written report by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, citing that 60 percent of Sudan identifies as Muslim and that the nation's president, Omar al-Bashir, seeks to enforce Sharia law, says: "Conversion from Islam is a crime punishable by death, suspected converts to Christianity face societal pressures, and government security personnel intimidate and sometimes torture those suspected of conversion."

Meriam's extremely poignant story is yet another contemporary example of the struggles and dangers of living a Christian life. Rightly did the Apostle Paul warn his disciple Timothy: **"Indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted"** (2 Timothy 3:12).

As we draw near the Great Feast of Our Lord's Ascension, we remember the myriad lessons we've received during Lent, Holy Week and Pascha. The Church has offered us more sermons on Jesus Christ as "the Light of the world" than we can begin to count. Still, we seem insistent and even content to choose the darkness of the world rather than the Light of the world. Though we're repeatedly called to "lay aside all earthly cares," we, like spoiled children, enthusiastically chase after them and then complain that we're simply helpless victims of modern society! We excuse ourselves from sharing real fellowship with certain others, even fellow communicants and family members, because they (for whatever reason) irritate us while we pursue relationships with certain others whose religious faith and ideology are diametrically opposed to what we believe is "good, right and true." We're all in favor of human rights and human freedom and human tolerance and human justice for all— at least until they burden MY life, limit MY freedom, challenge MY opinions, and conflict with MY understanding of justice.

Where is the heartfelt joy—that inner light of our souls—that enables us to see the glory, majesty and miracles of our God and rejoice in thanksgiving for His grace, gifts and the divine forgiveness springing from the life-creating Cross and empty tomb of Our Lord?! Are we so quick to abandon our joy, recant our faith, renounce our Risen Lord, and burn a pinch of incense to Caesar to save our lives at the expense of our souls!?

We need to pray for one another, and especially for Meriam and those like her. We

need to let the Light of Christ shine in our hearts that others may see. We need to sing forever with the Church, **«Let God arise, let His enemies be scattered. Let those who hate Him flee from before His face.»**

We need to be able to stand in the midst of the fallen world with

enough faithfulness and courage to say: **«I am a Christian, and I will remain a Christian.»**

