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Companions on the Journey

August 15, 2021

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Assumption into heaven of Mary, the Mother of Jesus of Nazareth, who is the God-man, Jesus the Christ. Jesus himself went up, ascended, of his own initiative, into heaven. He returns to the Father to be reunited in the Kingdom of Heaven and once there they together breathe their own Holy Spirit upon the face of the earth in a new moment of creation.

Mary does not go up to God, or ascend to God of her own volition. She is taken up, (a=from or away + sumo=to take). Mary is taken into the kingdom of heaven by the power of God. She who was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit and in that moment conceived the Christ child within her womb does not undergo corruption in her body at the end of her life. While Jesus himself died and was buried, his body did not undergo corruption or decay like everyone else's body does. If we had been there at the end of Mary's life what would we have seen? There is no eye-witness account of Mary's assumption. Artists down through the century have done their best to depict what the assumption means and to convey its theological import to those who are still on earth. But no one saw Mary ascend as these artists try to portray it.

There are claims about where Mary went to God. One claim is from Ephesus based on Jesus' word to Mary from the cross where he says to the Beloved Disciple: "Behold your mother." And the scripture says that "The disciple took her into his home from that hour." We know from other historical sources that John, the Beloved Disciple, went to Ephesus (which is in modern day Turkey). Thus, there is some reason to believe that John would have taken Mary there.

On the other hand, there is a church in Jerusalem named the Dormition of Mary. The tradition is that the church is built on the site of her last days on earth. We are free to believe what we want when there is no incontrovertible evidence. The Church herself does not say that Mary died. It simply says that her days on earth came to a conclusion. Why won't the Church simply declare that Mary did die? Because death entered as a result of sin and Mary, our conviction is that she was conceived free from the effect of original sin and did not commit personal sins at any time in her life. She was sinless and therefore the theological question arises as to whether she would die or even could die.

My own thinking is that even Jesus, the sinless One of God, died and I believe that Mary died also. The custom among Jews at that time was that the burial would take place almost immediately and then there would be a week of mourning and receiving consolation from family and friends. Today this is called sitting Shiva. Burial was not always in a dug grave but often in a stone mausoleum carved out of stone much like the way Jesus' own burial is depicted in the Scriptures. After the burial, a year or even two years, family would return to the tomb and enter. They would collect the bones of the deceased person and place them in a box called an ossuary and then store the bones in a small place and re-use the burial site for another family member.

I believe this happened in the case of Mary. But when they returned there were no signs of her body. No bones. No decay. No body. What happened to it? Similar to the question Mary Magdalen asked at the grave of Jesus on Easter Sunday morn. He is not here. He is risen! She is not here. She has been taken—incorrupt—into the kingdom of heaven. That is why there are no signs of her decayed body. She has been taken away. She has been taken up to heaven. She has been assumed into heaven. The assumption. But why? The meaning is one of faith. Death cannot destroy those who believe in Jesus. Mary goes first into that kingdom by the grace and favor of God (Hail O highly favored daughter, Archangel Gabriel says to young Mary.) It is a faith statement and belief of the Church. We can offer no proof any more than we can offer proof of the resurrection. But we believe it. And Christians believed, from the earliest centuries, that Mary was assumed into heaven. And so do we.

Peace,
Msgr. McHenry