

**ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA**

August 15, 2021 – FEAST OF ST. MARY THE VIRGIN

The Rev. Dr. Nina George–Hacker

Sermon: “*Saint Mary the Virgin: A Friend in Heaven*”

Isaiah 61:10-11	(The prophet proclaims God is doing new things)
Psalms 34:1-9	(Praise for the Lord’s blessings, salvation, and help)
Galatians 4:4-7	(God sent His Son, born of woman, to save us)
St. Luke 1:46-55	(Mary magnifies the Lord for all His works)

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Even though March 25 is actually the Feast of the Annunciation, every year during Advent we hear the Scripture lessons about the Archangel Gabriel announcing to St. Mary the Virgin that she will bear the Savior of the World as her firstborn son. As the Church year goes on, Mary appears in a number of stories about Jesus’ life, all the way up to His crucifixion. But what happened to her after Jesus—from the cross—gave His Mother into the care of His cousin and disciple, John? We know she was with the disciples on Pentecost, but not much else. As a human being, her life eventually came to an end.

Now, if you made a pilgrimage to the Church of the Sepulcher of St. Mary near Jerusalem, what do you think you would find in her tomb? *Nothing*. It’s *empty*, just as Jesus’s was. The New Testament says nothing about the death and burial of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, but a strong Christian tradition places Mary’s tomb in a dimly-lit church at the foot of the Mount of Olives, in the Kidron Valley near Gethsemane. There, a large crypt containing the empty tomb in the Church of the Assumption is all that remains of an early fifth-century church, making it possibly the oldest near-complete religious building in Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup>

Although we have no biblical information about the end of Mary's life or her death, and many Christians believe that none exist in other early writings, two apocryphal documents are viewed as explaining Mary’s final fate. The first-century “Book of John about the Dormition of Mary,” thought to possibly have been written by James, the brother of Jesus, places her tomb near Gethsemane, as does a fourth-century “Treatise about the Passing of the Blessed Virgin Mary.”<sup>2</sup>

If Mary’s tomb had not been empty, every church in the world would have a piece of her bones or clothing as a relic! Some Church writings indicate it once contained her burial shroud, which was sent on to Constantinople.<sup>3</sup>

On August 15, the Anglican Church gives us the Feast of St. Mary the Virgin. For the Eastern Orthodox world, it is celebrated at the Feast of the Dormition of the Theotokos (the “Mother of God”), and it is observed as the Feast of the Assumption by Roman Catholics. Regardless of our varying interpretations of what happened to St. Mary, it is an opportunity for us to find out more about who Mary is, and what that means for us. Also, who Mary is, and what that means for Jesus.

Christians have had to find a way to explain why Mary’s tomb is empty, and we differ in the following ways: The Eastern Orthodox Church believes that Mary died a natural death, upon which her soul was received by Christ, and on the third day her body was resurrected, at which time she was taken up into heaven, body and soul. Roman Catholic teaching holds that Mary was “assumed” into heaven, with differing teachings about whether she died first, or was taken up, alive.

As Anglicans, we, too, believe that Mary was taken unto God directly, but to understand this better, we need to examine the difference between the Greek and Latin for the words ‘Ascension,’ in Greek, the word is *anabasis*, and ‘Assumption,’ in Greek, the word is *analepsis*. ‘Ascension’ means “going up” and gives an active, dynamic role to the person who goes up. In the Bible, the only one who goes up to the Father by right is the Divine Son. John 3:31 tells us, “No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.”

By contrast, ‘Assumption means’ “taking up.” Here, the agent is outside the person, and the action is more passive. “Taking up” is a gift, one that God offers to Mary by taking her unto Himself.<sup>4</sup> It is only fitting that God would not permit the body of His Son’s Mother—and of the Holy Spirit’s earthly spouse—to undergo the corruption of one who is dead and buried. God also wants to take each one of *us* unto Himself, and it is up to us to embrace the faith that will make this possible, just as Mary did.

As such, she who was our fellow pilgrim on earth is held in great honor by our heavenly Father. As the Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, Mary is a preeminent and altogether unique member of the Church, and yet, she is still one of us. Tradition holds that upon her arrival in heaven, Jesus crowned His Mother as the Queen of Heaven, and that is why you often see art depicting Mary with a crown—sometimes of stars—on her head. In 1954, Pope Pius XII issued an encyclical stating that Mary is called Queen of Heaven because her Son, Jesus Christ, is the King of Israel and the heavenly King of the universe. This follows the ancient Davidic tradition, in which the Mother of the king was recognized as the Queen Mother of Israel.<sup>5</sup>

Thomas Ken, an Anglican bishop, wrote in a seventeenth-century hymn: “*Heaven with transcendent joys her entrance graced, next to his throne her Son his Mother placed, and her below now she’s of heaven possessed, all generations are to call her blessed.*”<sup>6</sup>

In His high-priestly prayer recorded in John 17, Jesus expresses His heartfelt desire to His Father for those who have been with Him that they “may be with me where I am, to behold my glory, which thou hast given me in thy love before the foundation of the world.” Not only did Christ long to have His Mother—and undoubtedly, His entire earthly family—with Him in eternity, but also, Jesus longed for each and every one of *us* to be with Him in His heavenly home.

I realize that most Protestants and many Anglicans are either ignorant of, or resistant to, the prayer that has come to be known as “The Hail Mary.” First of all, it is *not* a prayer to the Virgin Mary. The first part, “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus” are taken from the words of the Angel Gabriel upon first meeting with her, and of her cousin Elizabeth—Mother of John the Baptist—when Mary went to visit after conceiving Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. These can be found in Luke 1, verses 28 and 42. The second part is asking *her* to pray *for us*: “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.”

That’s my favorite part of this prayer. Because this is no more strange than asking *anyone* in heaven to pray for us. As Anglicans, we strongly believe in the Communion of Saints—those Christians who are not dead but *alive* in the presence of God in eternity. We ask our friends and family members on earth to pray for us, don’t we? Since we need all the help we can get, God has set it up so that we can also ask people in heaven to pray for us.

In Romans 8:34, St. Paul proclaims, “Christ Jesus is the one who died, but even more, has been raised; he also is at the right hand of God and intercedes for us.” Think about it, Jesus prays for you! So why wouldn’t His Mother? In the Gospel story of the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-12), Jesus’ Mother intercedes for the bride and groom by telling the wine stewards, “Do whatever [Jesus] tells you”—which leads to a miracle!

Not only can we ask Mary and Jesus to pray for us, but also, we can ask any and every Christian who has gone on before us. Many times, I've asked my Dad to pray for me, and sometimes when I feel we need prayer for St. John's Church, I ask Reid and Bev Heeren to intercede for us. When someone tells me about a sick animal, I ask St. Francis to pray for and watch over their furry friend.

You can research on the Internet or in a library whom the Church has made a patron saint of various causes, and ask for their help. I tend to joke that when I was 39 and still single, I started asking St. Rita of Cascia, the patron saint of impossible causes—not St. Jude, the patron saint of *lost* causes—to find me a good Christian husband. Well, a little over a year later, Rick and I were married. Now, that wasn't *Rita's* doing, because prayer is always *to* God. But I'd like to think she threw in a sympathetic prayer or two for me—and maybe for Rick, too!—because God answered in such a wonderful, incredible way.

So, let us remember that our Blessed Mother was taken into heaven by God—the same gift the Lord wants to give everyone who believes in His Son—where she now lives to pray for us. And let us also keep in mind the deepest desire of Jesus' heart before He went to the cross was for all whom the Father had given Him—that means you and me—to be with Him in eternity.

Think of His great joy upon being reunited with His beloved Mother! Think of our joy, when one day we shall be with Mary and Jesus, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit, as well as friends, family, parishioners, and all the great saints, prophets, patriarchs, matriarchs, and martyrs: Thomas Cranmer, Queen Elizabeth I, Mother Teresa, Johann Sebastian Bach, Abraham and Sarah, King David, Martin Luther, Father Lorenz, St. Paul, St. Clare, Billy and Ruth Graham. The 'Heavenly Directory' is *endless!*

Holy Mary, mother of God—and all you citizens of heaven—pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen! Alleluia!

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<sup>1</sup> "Tomb of Mary," [Seetheholyland.net](https://www.seetheholyland.net) (n.d.) <<https://www.seetheholyland.net/tomb-of-mary/>> 10 August 2021.

<sup>2</sup> "Tomb of the Virgin Mary," [Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tomb_of_the_Virgin_Mary), 5 July 2021, <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tomb\\_of\\_the\\_Virgin\\_Mary](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tomb_of_the_Virgin_Mary)> 10 August 2021.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Adapt. Lindsay Urwin, "Mother Out of Sight: Reflections on the Assumption," [The Anglican Digest](#), (Summer, 2021) Vol. 63, No. 2, p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> "Queen of Heaven," [Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queen_of_Heaven), 6 August 2021, <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queen\\_of\\_Heaven](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queen_of_Heaven)> 10 August 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Adapt. Urwin, *op. cit.*, p. 41.