

MAYBE...

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The Feast of St. Mary the Virgin (Proper 16)
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Orthodox Christians call her *Theotokas*—God-bearer. Catholics refer to her in many ways, but primarily as the “ever-virgin Mary,” which, by the way, the Bible specifically disproves. We could say she is the most revered woman in the world. Even the Qur’an of Islam has a chapter devoted to Mary. She is, by all accounts, a religious Rock Star.

But the New Testament, surprisingly, has very little to say about Mary after the birth narratives. She is mentioned when Jesus at age 12 fails to follow his family home, again at the wedding at Cana, and she is among groups at the Crucifixion, after the Resurrection, and at the Ascension. We applaud her for saying “Yes” to the angel Gabriel, but then, who among us wouldn’t be agreeable if an archangel suddenly appeared in our bedrooms. And we know she visited Elizabeth, her kinswoman, when they were both pregnant, which in itself took courage because the trip from Nazareth to Jerusalem is about 85 miles one way—and there were no express buses.

This date that we celebrate as the Feast of St. Mary the Virgin is celebrated as the Assumption by Catholics, who believe (again without any biblical evidence) that she was assumed bodily into heaven, much like her son. The Orthodox Christians call this feast the Dormition or “falling asleep” of Mary. Also not in the Bible are the names of her parents, Saints Anne and Joachim, who are named in non-canonical sources. (I have a special connection to St. Anne because not only is it my middle name, but I was married and my two children baptized in the Church of St. Anne in Garden City, Long Island.)

In short, her importance in Christian tradition is out of proportion to the relatively few times she appears in the New Testament. Most of what Christians hear about Mary is from Church tradition—conjecture made for the purposes of those who say this or that about her. Some Christians revere her, others feel she has been raised up to screen the holding-down of real women in the Church, still others are puzzled by her high visibility. What we do know from archeology and scientific biblical analysis is that Mary came from an unimportant blue-collar town way north of Jerusalem where nothing much of importance happened (John 1:46). Her betrothal to Joseph the carpenter, although respectful, may not have been a love-match but one of cultural necessity. Joseph needed a wife. Mary needed a husband. *Voilà!*

Over the years, churchmen have accorded Mary great importance and artists have relentlessly painted her in blue. Many of us, especially women who grew up in the Catholic Church, had statues or pictures of Mary in our bedrooms. And the rosary is still one of the most powerful means of prayer in the Church. As I said, Mary is a religious Rock Star.

But let’s get back to the Bible. If you look only at the New Testament and forget all that other stuff that has been declared in her name since the first century, you might come up with a different title for her: **Revolutionary!**

St. Luke puts the words of the Magnificat into Mary’s mouth, words that resemble Hannah’s prayer in I Samuel 2:1-10. But if not original, still the words are courageous. Remember that Mary’s pregnancy comes *before* Jesus and his teachings. Obvious, right? But consider that the words of the Magnificat proclaim an upside-down world of which neither the Roman rulers nor the very wealthy kings of Israel would approve: the rich going away empty, the rulers brought down. What kind of nonsense is that? She could have gotten into real trouble going public with that.

Remember that Mary lived in an occupied country guarded by soldiers not known for their kindness. While Jewish religion and government were allowed to function, the final word on anything was still Rome’s, and under that jurisdiction, Jewish tradition plodded along.

I’m a great fan of mysteries, I consume them at the rate of a couple of books a week. I’m right now reading the Joe Leaphorn mystery series by Tony Hillerman. Leaphorn is a Navajo policeman so the books are full of Navajo lore and descriptions of life on the reservations. The book I just finished, *Dancehall of the Dead*,¹ (AKA heaven) has a scene where Leaphorn is talking to an archeologist working a dig on the “res” and digging up evidence of a

¹ Hillerman, Tony. *Dancehall of the Dead*. HarperCollins, 1974. p.26.

prehistoric people known to his science as Folsom Man. Findings by other archeologists show that Folsom Man died out and evidence of his existence only went to a certain point in time. The archeologist in this scene questions whether Folsom Man actually died out, or whether he adapted to new conditions and thus, his tools appeared to come from a different time and perhaps a different civilization. Leaphorn, trying to understand, puts it this way:

“Had Folsom Man been trapped by this time-consuming ritualism which delayed his adaptation to changing conditions and caused his extinction? Whatever the reason, he vanished.”

Let me read that again...

“Had Folsom Man been trapped by this time-consuming ritualism which delayed his adaptation to changing conditions and caused his extinction? Whatever the reason, he vanished.”

Mary stood in a world trapped in its ancient ritualism, going nowhere, progressing not at all, until her firstborn son magnified the words of the Magnificat and carried out the revolution started by his mother. Jesus preached the upside-down values that his mother hinted at...and we know what happened next. The world was so turned around that we now date our calendars back to that time referring to the Christian Era and Before the Christian Era, or more traditionally, Before Christ and *Anno Domini (AD)*, or “in the year of Our Lord.” Even Judaism was shaken up and reformed in that same century when the great Temple was burned and the rabbis had to leave town and regroup into what became known as Rabbinic Judaism. And even *that* was reformed into Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionism Judaism, just as Christianity was reformed over and over by monasticism: St. Benedict and St. Francis and St. Ignatius; by Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley: and by the Liturgical Reforms of the late 20th century.

And it's not far-fetched to say it all started with Mary.

Now, what has this to do with us, other than giving us a reason to celebrate this Feast of St. Mary the Virgin? The Church today is plodding along, struggling to keep buildings repaired and people in the pews. We know that well, you and I. My congregation had to give up its building in Brewster. You have had to merge two parishes into one. But maybe, *maybe*, we're not done. The Episcopal Church stands on that famous three-legged stool: Scripture, Tradition, and Reason. Scripture is undeniable and unchanging, but we must be careful not to let Tradition be too bossy, and we must always trust the Holy Spirit to guide our reasoning even when we don't like what we're hearing.

Maybe... we're not done.

Maybe... the way we've always done things is taking too much energy to sustain.

Maybe... the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, the great Shepherd of the sheep... is still working in you and in me that which will make us perfect in every good work to do his will.

Maybe... we need to look up from the familiar and see what may be new and improved.

Maybe... we need to turn our energies from *doing* what we know how to do, to *listening* to what we may not have heard yet.

Maybe...

And it all started with St. Mary the Revolutionary. *AMEN.*

Readings: Isaiah 61:10-11; Psalm 34:1-9; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 1:46-55.