

Jesus's Mom

May 10, 2026 – Mothers Day

John 19:26-27

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Welcome to our Mothers Day celebration here at UCC Westerly. For those of you who know me, it will come as no surprise that this will not be your typical Mothers Day Sunday sermon. For one thing, in writing this sermon, I drove autocorrect crazy because I refuse to put an apostrophe into the “Mothers” part of Mothers Day. That’s because I have always understood this as a special day in which to honor all women, not just women who are mothers. Even more importantly, I am also acknowledging the simple fact that every single person here today, every single person you encounter anywhere today, every single person anywhere – has a mother. It is a biological necessity, just as it is for every single person to have a father. Fathers, just hold on, your day is coming in June.

Here at UCC Westerly under my tenure as your pastor our Mothers Day celebrations previously have tended to go along more traditional lines. I would usually ask in advance for volunteers to share stories about their own mothers or I would talk about my own mother or we would talk about mothers in general – you get the picture. But this year, we are doing something very different and I’m guessing fairly unique. We’re going to spend some time learning about Jesus’s mother. And well we should. Mary’s history and significance within Christianity, and even Islam and other world religions cannot be underestimated.¹ The stories about her while her son Jesus was alive are pretty straightforward with the most debated aspect of Jesus’ birth family being whether or not Jesus shared his mother with other brothers and sisters. At several points in the gospels, references are made to Jesus having siblings but in the world of Mariology – the theology which has formed around the person of Mary – this has proven controversial. At the crux of this controversy is the question of whether or not Mary remained a perpetual virgin, since she conceived Jesus and bore Jesus while remaining a virgin. Some faithful folks in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, and even some Lutheran and Anglican churches, feel that as *Theotokos*, or “God-bearer” she must have remained a virgin.

¹ [Mary, mother of Jesus - Wikipedia](#)

Admittedly, to those of us from a more “low church” tradition that does not put much emphasis on Mary other than at the Nativity and again at the cross, these arguments about the most personal and private details of her life – like whether or not she had more children – just don’t matter that much to us. She’s just Mary, Jesus’ mom to us. We don’t get hung up on the key points of what the Roman Catholic Church calls “the Key Marian doctrines.”² These include:

- *Immaculate Conception* – Mary herself was conceived without sin.
- *Mother of God* – As the mother of Jesus Mary is *Theotokos* (God-bearer) or Mother of God.
- *Virgin Birth of Jesus* – Mary conceived Jesus by action of the Holy Spirit while remaining a virgin.
- *Perpetual Virginity* – Mary remained a virgin all her life, even after the act of giving birth to Jesus.
- *Dormition* – Mary “falls asleep” in death. (Orthodox churches only)
- *Assumption* – Mary was taken bodily into heaven either at or before her death.

The history of the way in which these doctrines about Mary were formed is indeed the history of the church. The oldest is the Virgin Birth of Jesus affirmed at the First Council of Nicaea in 325. The most recent is the doctrine of the Assumption of Mary which was set by a papal encyclical authored by Pope Pius XII in 1950. So, Mary’s story continues to evolve and grow as her role in the faith of millions around the world is often grounded in admiration of and devotion to this woman whose single identifying life experience is giving birth to a baby who went on to change the world. Mary herself acknowledges how extraordinary her entire situation is as she explains it in the lyrical poem in the Gospel of Luke’s first chapter called the *Magnificat*. Mary says, “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed.” But I don’t think Mary ever expected anything like what Mariology and Marian devotion has become.

As I was doing some reading for this sermon, I struggled with how much to include given that there are literally thousands and thousands of pages of scholarly as well as faith-based writings on just who Mary was and, even more importantly, who she became as her role in the history of the world took on more

² Ibid.

and more significance. Scholars today see in the lifting up of Mary to a unique place in the developing Christian faith as growing out of two different realities. One was the desire to diminish the role of Mary Magdalene as a significant leader in the early Christian movement since as a mere woman she could not be seen in a leadership role. Remember all those prohibitions against women speaking in church which appear in Paul's epistles? Now, consider what you remember about Mary the mother of Jesus speaking in the Gospel stories. She does, but only twice. In John's Gospel, she instigates Jesus' first miracle by urging him to turn water into wine at a wedding they attended. He didn't want to do it and rebuked his mother for asking, but eventually he did it. Then, she speaks also in Luke's story describing the time when the boy Jesus stays behind in the Temple and his parents leave without him, not realizing he's gone. Three days pass before they realize he's missing and they go back to Jerusalem and find him in the Temple at which point Mary says something along the lines of, "what were you thinking, Jesus? You scared us!" Jesus flippantly answers her by saying, "you should have known I would be here in my Father's house." Well, alright then. So, Mary was safe to venerate as a woman within the early Christian church structures because she really doesn't say much at all, and when she does, Jesus puts her in her place. Contrast this portrayal with that of Mary Magdalene who was literally the first person to preach the Resurrection because she refused to abandon Jesus. After his ascension into heaven, she continued on offering leadership in the circle of the apostles. She would not be quiet so she had to go. But she was so popular in the early church that the only way to put her in her place, church leaders decided was that a different woman was needed to replace her. Ah ha! Mary, Jesus' mother! She'll be perfect!!

Added to this scenario was the already existing and very popular Roman, Greek and Egyptian mother goddess cults. "The Roman Empire was a melting pot of religious traditions, many of which celebrated divine maternal figures as sources of protection, fertility, and salvation. Central to the religious life of the empire were cults that venerated mother goddesses, including Isis, Cybele, and Demeter, whose attributes and imagery bore striking similarities to later depictions of Mary."³ Thus, the foundation for a strong female divine presence was already in place when Emperor Constantine officially proclaimed that the Roman Empire was now Christian in 312 CE. By this time devotion to Mary as the

³ [Mother of God cult in the Roman empire and its transformation into Marian devotion - Fabrizio Musacchio](#)

Mother of Jesus was well underway even though her story within the church was just beginning. And what a story it was and still is. As recently as the papacies of two 20th century popes – John Paul II and Benedict XVI – the leadership of the Roman Catholic church has worked to keep Mary at the center of evolving theological and devotional practices. They both suggested a “redirection of the whole church towards ... [Mary] ... in order to ensure an authentic approach to Christology via a return to the ‘whole truth about Mary’, writing: ‘It is necessary to go back to Mary if we want to return to the truth about Jesus Christ, truth about the church and truth about man.’”⁴ So, it is no wonder that pilgrimages to Marian apparitions around the world continue to gain popularity. Marian devotional practices like praying the Rosary and even special prayer requests made directly to Mary asking her to intercede with her Son and even directly to God are common practice in Catholic and Orthodox churches today.

I could go on and on here because, in case you hadn’t noticed by now, I am simply fascinated by Mary and what the church has done with her.

“The multiple forms of Marian devotions include various prayers and hymns, the celebration of several Marian feast days in liturgy, the veneration of images and relics, the construction of churches dedicated to her and pilgrimages to Marian shrines. Many Marian apparitions and miracles attributed to her intercession have been reported by believers over the centuries. She has been a traditional subject in arts, notably in Byzantine art, medieval art and Renaissance art.”⁵

Through it all though, one simple truth about Mary is repeatedly given short shrift. She was a courageous young girl who said yes to an incredible proposition presented to her by a divine creature, an angel. We forget she could have said no. I have often wondered how many times later on in her life she had second thoughts about that yes. Maybe as she was heavily pregnant riding a donkey into a dirt poor town where the only place for her to rest – and give birth – was in a stable. Or maybe as she and Joseph had to flee to Egypt shortly after his birth to escape the wrath of Herod. Or maybe as the Wise Ones came bearing gifts for a newborn baby all of which had to do with death. Or maybe she wondered if she dreamed it all as Jesus grew up and did all the things small boys do. He learned the carpenter’s trade from Joseph and apparently earned his living at that while

⁴ Ibid. [Mary, mother of Jesus - Wikipedia](#)

⁵ Ibid.

he cared for her after Joseph died. All those weird gifts and scary words of prophecy about her tiny boy had by now slipped into faded memories, easily forgotten. But then, things changed as Jesus grew older. He never seemed to find the “right girl” and he seemed more and more distracted, looking to the horizon as though looking for something ahead that he could never see.

Then one day, he heard that his cousin John, known now as John the Baptist, was baptizing folks in the Jordan, urging them to repent of their sins and start over, cleansed and ready for a new beginning. Jesus took off to go see John, or at least that’s what he told her. But he didn’t come back to her right away. And when he did, something was very different. He was very different. He told her he had to leave to do what his Father in heaven needed him to do. It was time, he told her, to do what he had been born to do. She nodded, a tear rolling down her cheek. She hugged him hard and sent him on his way. From time to time word would come back to her about what he had been up to and she would be proud, and also very worried as she was also hearing that the religious leaders were increasingly upset with him and what he was teaching. She had a bad feeling – mother’s intuition one could say – that this would not end well for Jesus and sadly she was proved right. She watched at a distance as her beautiful boy was arrested and tried by first the Temple authorities and then by Rome itself. And, as she feared, Rome took its revenge by crucifying him. She followed as he made the journey to Golgotha. She cringed as they nailed him to the cross. She was as close as she could be to him as his life dripped away, her beautiful baby boy filled with so much love, so much hope and promise. He was dying and there was nothing she could do but be there with him. That’s when it happened. With almost his dying breath, he called out to her saying, “Woman, here is your son. Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” Both Mary and Jesus’s dearest friend were crying now as they realized his last thoughts were of her, of making sure someone would take care of her. She would outlive her son. No mother ever wants to outlive her child and yet clearly her life would be going on without him. Her agony by now was almost unbearable. Then she watched him die.

Now we know how the story ends, don’t we. We just celebrated the ending of this story on Easter Sunday a few weeks ago. Jesus is returned to life once more. Some of the stories of that morning have Mary as part of the group of women at the tomb while others don’t. We just don’t know. We don’t know what happened to Mary – the Mary who was happy just to be Jesus’s mom. That mom

has been lost to time and layers of attention and devotion she never sought nor expected. Jesus' mom who cooked his favorite meals and bandaged his skinned knees is who I am asking us to remember today. Not the Mary who became *Theotokos*. Not the Mary of the apparitions or the shrines or the Rosary. Not the Mary depicted over a thousand years of magnificent art. That Mary we know, almost too well.

Jesus's mom is the Mary I want us to remember for in her story of motherhood we are reminded of all those women in our lives who made us who we are today – our mothers and grandmothers, our “like mothers” who mentored us and loved us just because they valued who we are. That's why I wish I could have known Mary, Jesus's mom. She was clearly a young woman of uncommon bravery and courage. A woman who could easily have said no but chose to say yes. A woman who loved and was loved by her son, who just so happened to be God's son too. Wow. She deserves to be remembered on Mothers Day, don't you think? I sure do. So do your own mothers and like mothers who touched your lives. A phone call would be good if they are still with us. A story remembered and shared is also wonderful if those special women in your life are already in God's nearer presence. By the way, I'm thinking Mary was there to greet them at those pearly gates. Isn't that something to imagine!!! Happy Mothers Day to them all. Amen.