

Perfume

A sermon on John 12:1-8

There are so many beautiful promises in our scriptures for this week. In Isaiah, we hear of the dry riverbeds in the desert being filled with water, and a way being made where there was no way before. In the psalm, which we read together as the call to worship, we hear of the LORD restoring the fortunes of Zion. In the passage from Philippians, Paul counts everything in this world as nothing compared to the promised wonders we'll receive in Christ. There is new life everywhere in our scriptures, and it's right around the corner.

Except for our Gospel Lesson. There's something strange happening there. It's a short lesson from John, first off, and we've been traveling with Luke all this Lent so far. On top of that, there's no context of what's happened before or what's about to happen and we have no idea of why Mary does what she does. We've been preparing ourselves for a new creation this Lent, and it's not at all clear how this story fits into that narrative.

But Thomas L. Ehrich, in *The Gift of New Creation*, pauses over this story. He notices what Jesus says to Mary and he says that we should pay attention to what happens here. So that's what I want to do in the sermon this morning. I think that this story holds encouragement for us, if we look at it right. But before we venture into Bethany and the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, would you pray with me?

God of life and death, thank you for bringing us to this time and place. Be with us here today. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Amen. So in this story, we have Jesus attending a dinner in Bethany at the home of some people that we're probably familiar with from other stories in scripture: Mary and Martha, those famous sisters who have different ideas about cleaning, and their brother Lazarus, who recently died.

He got better.

This story, the story of Mary anointing Jesus, actually comes right after the raising of Lazarus from the dead. That happens in chapter 11 and this is chapter 12. And it's important to remember that story before we read this one. Jesus had been preaching somewhere else on the other side of the Jordan, when he hears that Lazarus is sick. We're told that Jesus loves Lazarus and his family, but he still waits two days before he heads his way. Now, we don't know why Jesus waited, but we do know what the disciples think about the reason behind his waiting: Lazarus lives in Judea and there are people in Judea who want to kill Jesus. When Jesus finally does decide to go, Thomas (of Doubting Thomas fame) says to his fellow disciples, "Let's go with him, that we may die with him."

Jo Schonewolf, preached at Salem UMC, 04-07-19

It's with this attitude that they go to Bethany to wake up brother Lazarus: ready for a fight. But when they get there, there no fight for the disciples to get into. Instead of an angry mob, they're greeted by Martha. She goes up to Jesus and she says, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." It's a bold move from a woman, and one that may have put the disciples back on edge. But then she says, "But I know that even now, God will give you anything you ask."

Jesus and Martha talk about resurrection and Jesus reminds us all the he is the Resurrection and the Life. Then Martha, comforted by her belief, goes to get Mary.

Now Mary did not go out to see Jesus when he arrived. She mourned deeply over the loss of her brother. But when Martha comes to get her and tells her the Teacher wants to see her, she gets up and runs to him, with a crowd of mourners running after her, thinking she's gone off to go weep at the tomb. When she sees Jesus, she falls at his feet weeping, saying, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

There's no theological discussion this time, no talk of resurrection. All Jesus can say in response to Mary's grief is, "Where have you laid him?"

And everyone else says to him the very thing he said to his disciples when he called them, three years ago by the Lake of Galilee. They say, "Come and see."

And Jesus weeps.

Now, John's gospel is not a gospel for this kind of behavior from Jesus. In John's gospel, Jesus knows it all. Jesus is rock solid, using signs and miracles to reveal himself to be the Son of God. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is eating and drinking and reacting all over the place, but in John, does nothing so human.

So when Jesus weeps in John's gospel, you know something serious is happening. He goes to the tomb and he asks for the stone to be rolled away and Martha, ever practical, says, "But Lord, the smell. He's been there four days."

Jesus doesn't care. The stone is rolled away and he prays and then calls for Lazarus to come out and out Lazarus comes.

When Jesus weeps, something serious happens.

And once word gets out about Lazarus, people start turning to Jesus. The leaders in Jerusalem actually wonder if there's any containing Jesus at this point. They're worried about an uprising, which would bring the full force of Rome to their doorstep. They decide that Jesus should die.

Jesus, hearing this, retreats to the wilderness near Ephraim and he stays there, even as people are headed to Jerusalem to get ready for the Passover. And everyone in Jerusalem is looking for him, wondering if he'll be so bold show up in Jerusalem at the Passover.

This is the backdrop to our story for this morning. What happens in our story this morning is the turning point of the gospel of John, when events have reached a fever pitch and everything starts to happen at once. Against this background, dinner at Mary, Martha, and Lazarus' starts to look pretty significant indeed.

Who knows what the conversation was at dinner that night. Maybe Jesus taught some more, reflecting on his recent time in the wilderness. Maybe Lazarus spent the evening turning to people and saying, "Boo!" Maybe Martha tosses in some of her ideas in between bringing out food and passing plates around. Maybe the disciples discussed whether or not they would go to Jerusalem for the festival, all amid the hustle and bustle of a big, busy dinner. Whatever they talked about, though, all of that discussion and laughter and noise stops when Mary comes into the room with perfume.

Imagine what it would be like to be there in this moment. Imagine the sound dying down and heads turning as Mary walks up to Jesus with this bottle of perfume in her hands. She kneels in front of him and there's a small crash as she breaks the jar open. The smell of the perfume spreads throughout the house and maybe the mutters start then. The text tells us that the perfume is pure nard, which comes from a plant grown in the Himalayas. It had to be traded for and it was very costly—Judas thinks that it could be sold for a year's wages. The costliness is the beginning of the scandal. Mary has spent an exorbitant amount of money on the perfume that she now uses to anoint Jesus.

But what she did next must have caused even more of a stir. Instead of anointing his head, as one might do with a king or someone else chosen by God, she stays kneeling and anoints his feet. She wipes them not with a cloth but with her hair. Imagine what looks Mary and Jesus exchanged after she had done this intimate and powerful thing for him. Imagine the rumors that began to swell around the room because of what she had done.

Judas is the first one to object out loud and he's silenced by Jesus right away, because, Jesus tells us, Mary understands something that no one else has caught onto yet. Jesus is going to die, and soon. That expensive perfume would last for at least another week, through his entry into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, through his last Passover with his disciples, and through his trial, execution and burial. She had this perfume so that she might keep it for the day of his burial and, seeing the writing on the wall about Jesus' conflict with the rulers in Jerusalem and knowing the type of death that Jesus was likely to die, Mary took the only chance she thought she would have to anoint Jesus' body for burial.

See Mary, in the midst of all of the hustle and bustle of the Passover preparations, amidst all of the excitement of Jesus' ministry and prophecy and miracles, in the middle of the continued celebrations of Lazarus' new life, sees what no one else sees. She sees her last days with someone she loves deeply. No matter what it costs, no matter what people may say, she is going to mourn him, show her love for him, and care for him however she can.

And Jesus is moved by this. Because of what Mary did, this house, which so recently smelled of death, now smells of perfume. Where before Mary had bathed his feet with tears when she thought he abandoned her brother to death, she now anoints his feet with deep humility and care because she knows the sacrifice he's about to make. It's a bold move for a woman to make and scripture tells us that Jesus loves Lazarus and his bold sisters. What Mary does has such an impact on Jesus that he'll repeat her scandal at the only other dinner recorded in John's gospel—the Last Supper, where he'll kneel before his disciples and wash their feet and dry them with a towel, just as Mary had dried his with her hair.

So what do we do with this story about Mary?

Well, I think we mourn.

Sometimes, our lives bring us to the same place Mary is. We can be overwhelmed by grief and loss, no matter what joy gets mixed in, and we need to name that grief and allow ourselves to feel it, no matter what else is going on in our lives. Mary took time to mourn Jesus on the eve of a potential political uprising—the stakes couldn't have been higher. And she is praised for her act by none other than Jesus. It is vital, then, that we, no matter our circumstances, allow ourselves to grieve.

Because it's that grieving that allows for new life to enter in. Next week, we'll wave our palms at the beginning of the service and remember the Passion story at the end. We will mourn that loss as we do every year, because mourning what we've lost on Good Friday makes us ready to welcome in the new life that comes on Easter Sunday. We repeat this pattern over and over again, year after year, because we need to be given permission and space to grieve in this and every season of our lives.

This story that we read is so emotionally dense when you think about the characters in it. John's gospel is full of stories about characters that feel real to us doing extraordinary things. And here, the person being praised is not the person with the most practical solution, the person focused on the mission and the goals. It's the person who's paying attention to the people around her and herself, the person who is caring for emotional needs that we may not even notice on first read. Mary is aware of how overwhelmed she is and the grief that is ahead of her, as well as of Jesus' vulnerable position, and she does this extravagant thing to honor these things.

As we go throughout this week and next, let's allow ourselves room for grief. Let's allow ourselves time to feel our emotions and to look out for the emotions of others. We hope and pray for new life, always, but let us with Mary mourn the pain in our lives. It might not seem like it right now, but if we do it right, our mourning will fill our lives with new sweetness, like perfume poured on the feet of the Savior.