

## **“Anointed for Burial”**

John 12:1-8

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Today’s gospel lesson brings us to the village of Bethany, home of the sisters Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus. We are very close to the climactic events at the end of Jesus’ earthly life – close in time, and close in space. We are close in time, because these events take place “six days before the Passover.” If you’ll remember, when Jesus and his disciples gathered in an upper room on the night before he died, it was a Passover meal. As this story dawns, Jesus has only about six days left to live.

And **we are very close in space**, because the village of Bethany is just a stone’s throw from Jerusalem, less than two miles away, just over the crest of the Mount of Olives. When you are standing in Jerusalem today **you have a wonderful view of the Mount of Olives**, and Bethany is on the slope on the far side. We are close. We are very, very close.

Today the village of Bethany is **a small city called al-Eizariya**, home to some 17,000 Arab Palestinians. At the heart of the city is the traditional site of **the Tomb of Lazarus**. John 11, the previous chapter, tells of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus died; his body was placed in a tomb; four days later, Jesus arrived and called him to come out. Lazarus emerged, his body still wrapped in cloths. You can visit the tomb where, according to tradition, these events happened; you go through a small doorway, then descend twenty-four uneven stone steps **into a small chamber**, maybe about the size of our little kitchenette. That little room is a place of prayer. The tomb itself is a few steps further down.

There are two churches adjacent to the tomb, **a Greek Orthodox Church** and a Roman Catholic Church. The **Roman Catholic Church** stands on the ruins of two older churches. On one of its walls are three large **mosaics, depicting Jesus’ friends** who lived here in Bethany: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

As our gospel story opens, Jesus is returning to Bethany. His ministry in Galilee, far to the north, has ended. He has come back to the vicinity of Jerusalem for the annual Passover celebration.

And ... he has come ... to die.

His friends here in Bethany throw a dinner party. Jesus is the guest of honor; Jesus’ disciples are also present – his twelve apostles, plus whoever else was traveling with him on his journey to Jerusalem.

Martha, of course, is in the kitchen; that’s where she enjoys spending her time, offering her culinary talents. Luke tells about the time when Jesus criticized Martha for spending *too* much time in

the kitchen and not enough time tending to her faith, but Jesus does not criticize her now. Perhaps he was grateful for the good meal and the loving hospitality.

Lazarus is present, reclining at the table, eating alongside Jesus. He doesn't say anything in this story. I would imagine that simply being in the presence of the Master who had brought him back to life would have left him with a deep sense of awe and gratitude.

And then there is Mary. In that story in Luke's gospel (Luke 10:38-42), Mary had "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying." Here, she does not listen; she *acts*. She picks up an alabaster jar containing twelve ounces of pure nard, and sits down at Jesus' feet with it.

What is nard? **Nard is an amber-colored essential oil** with a strong, pleasant aroma. It comes from a plant that grows in the Himalaya Mountains. Yes, the *Himalaya* mountains; the mountains of Nepal, southern China, and northern India. Those mountains are about *two thousand five hundred miles* from Bethany. Nard was not native to the Middle East! The Egyptians and the Greeks had been importing it for centuries to use as a perfume. Originally it had been considered a luxury for the rich and powerful. Now, thanks to Roman trade, it was a bit more common, so that somebody like Mary could have some – although it was still very expensive. That little jar was worth what an average laborer would earn over the course of an *entire year – tens of thousands of dollars*, by today's standards!

So when **Mary takes the nard and rubs it into Jesus' feet with her hair**, Judas protests: *What is she doing?* She's *wasting* it! "That perfume could have been sold, and the money given to the poor!"

He's right. It could have. The money from the sale of the nard would have made *quite* a bit of difference in the lives of some poor people. From a purely *numbers* standpoint, it *was* a waste.

But Judas fails to consider two important matters. One of them is his own hypocrisy. John reveals that **Judas was a thief**. He was the treasurer for Jesus' little band of disciples; he was in charge of all their money – and he had a tendency of taking some of it for himself from time to time. He was a disciple of Jesus, but he wasn't "all in." The cost of discipleship was a higher price than he was willing to pay. He could have gone to Jesus to talk about that – I'm sure Jesus would have appreciated his honesty; I know *I* certainly appreciate it when people are honest with *me*. It's far more pleasant to learn an uncomfortable truth about someone from an honest confession, than from some other way. Jesus surely knew what Judas was doing; earlier in the gospel, John tells us that Jesus "knew all people" and that "he knew what was in everyone." (John 2:24-25) He was probably hoping that Judas would come to him to confess his sin. But no, Judas does not offer a confession; instead, he offers an accusation, about what someone *else* is doing wrong. He seems to have forgotten what Jesus said about "taking the log out of your own eye" before "seeing the speck in your neighbor's eye." (Matthew 7:3-5) He could see Mary's sin – or what he perceived as a sin – but he was unwilling to deal with his own.

**Everyone is watching**. The room is quiet. All eyes are on Jesus, and on Mary at his feet, and on Judas pointing his accusing finger her way. It is an uncomfortable moment. How will Jesus respond?

He says to Judas: "Leave her alone. She did this in preparation for my burial. You will always

have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.”

Here is the other important matter that Judas failed to consider: *Jesus is not just anybody*. He’s not just a nice guy, a good teacher. He’s not even just a miracle-worker, someone with the power to bring people back from the dead. He’s the *Messiah*. He’s the *Son of God*. And *he’s about to die* ... not just because the Romans are going to execute him. He’s going to die, *to bring us our salvation*.

I wonder how much Mary knew. I wonder how much Jesus himself had told her, like on that day when he chastised Martha for being “worried and distracted with too many things” while Mary sat at his feet. Jesus had been telling his disciples for a while now that he was going to be betrayed, condemned, and killed. Most of them had rejected this teaching; maybe they thought he was just being ridiculous. But maybe Mary understood the truth. Maybe Mary knew that he had come to Bethany one final time – that this would be the end, that after this week she would never see him again. Not in *this* earthly form.

So she anointed his body, in preparation for its burial. The Passover is coming in six days. Jesus will be dead within a week. It was customary to put a fragrant perfume on the body of someone who had died. It helped to cover the smell. Jesus isn’t dead yet ... but he will be soon.

What does Jesus mean, “You will always have the poor among you?” Don’t take this the wrong way. He’s not saying that he doesn’t care about the poor. His acts demonstrate that he cared about *everybody*. The poor are not second-class citizens in God’s eyes. There is much good work, and many good deeds, that many Christians do, to help relieve the sufferings of the poor. But the unfortunate reality is that the economics of the world are such that there will always be people who are poor. At least, until Jesus comes back. When the new heavens and the new earth are created, I doubt anyone will be impoverished anymore. There won’t be a need for *money*. There won’t be any *greed*. That day is a long way off. Until then, we need to keep caring about the poor, just as Jesus himself did.

Mary offered Jesus a lavish gift. A gift so extravagant that it drew people’s attention, it caused some to question the wisdom of what she was doing. She does it because she thinks he’s worth it. **He’s about to die**. He’s about to be betrayed, condemned, beaten, and hung on a cross to die.

The thing Jesus, Jesus offers *us* a lavish gift too. An utterly *extravagant* gift. The gift of our salvation. The gift of sins forgiven. The gift of reconciliation with God. He does it at great cost to himself. At great personal *sacrifice*.

**Maybe Mary understood that**. Maybe she knew what was about to happen – and what Jesus was going to *accomplish* through it. Maybe that’s why she did what she did.

And what about Lazarus? He’s observing all this, listening to Jesus talk about his own upcoming burial. I wonder what he was thinking. He’d been *dead*. He still *would* be dead – if it weren’t for Jesus.

I bet Lazarus had a bit of a smile on his face. I bet he knew that Jesus wouldn’t stay dead.

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