



"Preparing the Body"

a sermon by

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Monday of Holy Week
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Our text this Monday of Holy Week comes to us from the gospel of John 12:1-11. This scene arrives on the heels of Christ's resurrection of Lazarus- when he rolled the gravestone that had been fixed for 4 days away from its place and called forth Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. After this great act the political heat around Jesus had kicked up a few notches, as the leaders of the synagogue had put out a warrant for his arrest because so many people were now flocking to his side. The week of Passover- Christ's last Passover- was now just beginning, and he went to Bethany to the home of Lazarus to celebrate the feast with his friends. The gospel of John chapter 12, beginning with the first verse.

“Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Isacariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.”

The Palm Sunday celebrations may very well still be ringing in our ears, but the party of Passover began for Jesus and his disciples the Saturday night before the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, in the meal we observe now as we take our seats at the feet of the gospel text and listen as the story of these days unfolds for us again. We know what this week will hold, but we recall that it all began with a dinner party in Bethany, after Lazarus had been risen from the grave. Not to put too fine a point on the foreshadowing, the gospel writer John, John the evangelist, seats Jesus at the table with a dead man brought back to life. And he surrounds him with his friends. One would assume that they are all there. Judas, James, John, and Andrew. Lazarus newly risen from the grave is in particularly high spirits and all of Jerusalem where they would soon pilgrimage to is preparing for the highest holy days of the year when all the Hebrews would gather to celebrate God's great act of provision, bringing the people up out of slavery in Egypt and claiming them as his own. Today is April 2. The celebration of Passover begins at sunset tonight. And on this night in Christ's life, while the mood is particularly exultant, the kitchen churning out a feast under Martha's capable and busy hands, Mary takes her seat at the feet of her Lord for the second time in her life that we know of. Perhaps Martha this evening felt that familiar frustration with her younger sister rising- while she prepared the unleavened bread for the meal and negotiated serving a household of guests, Mary simply sat there before Jesus. But they had had this conversation before, and Jesus had told Martha that Mary had made the better choice and so she certainly wasn't going to bring it up again.

So in the middle of that party for Jesus for giving them an occasion to celebrate by raising their friend and brother from the dead, in the atmosphere of celebration on the eve of Passover,

Mary silences the room with a single act. She takes out a jar of ointment- an ointment, we learn, that cost about 300 denarii- approximately a year's worth of wages. So, given inflation, She takes out a one pound jar of ointment that ran we'll say, what, about \$30,000 proportionately, cracks open the container, and slathers the contents onto Jesus' feet. The smell of perfume flooded the air. Exotic spices that probably completely overwhelmed the senses, surpassed the baking bread and choice meats, overcoming the smell of wine. She floods the house with the fragrance of perfume set aside to anoint a body. To honor a king, one would begin to anoint his body at a party such as this by pouring out the ointment over the top of his head so that it might flow down his face and beard and over his shoulders, baptizing him in perfume as a sign of honor. To anoint a corpse one began at the feet. This gift is extravagant. The choice of where to begin is questionable. And the means by which she anoints is shocking. "Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair." Ordinarily any woman of virtue would let down her hair on only two occasions. To demonstrate her grief and distraction over the death of a loved one, or upon meeting her husband in their bedchamber.

So the entire room is not only silenced, it is thrown into uncomfortable paradox as well. Mary unloads a year's wage on a singular gesture for a man dedicated to serving the poor. She honors him with her intention to anoint but does so in a way reserved for the dead. And she lets down her hair in public in an act associated with profound intimacy and grief. No one seemed to get it but her and Christ. Judas certainly betrayed his hand- he was in it for the money but undoubtedly spoke what was on everyone's mind. What in the world is she doing? At the very least, why was this money not being given to the poor? But Christ came to her defense, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." It would seem that Mary and Jesus were the only ones to get it indeed. Mary was preparing the body. Preparing the body of Christ for the grave. Before it was to be placed in a tomb it had to be cleansed and anointed and this woman, the most unlikely disciple for the day, understood what was to come for Jesus and knew what had to be done. In the joy of the evening death is foreshadowed in a way that cannot be missed. And the response of discipleship that Jesus is looking for on the eve of his suffering is not that the people go out and give all that they have to the poor, but it is that they honor him while he is still with them. The better choice for discipleship tonight is simply an extravagant, costly, overwhelming, intimate relationship with Christ that honors him for who he is and honestly acknowledges what lay in store. This is what he desires of the woman at his feet. And this is what he desires of us.

In this snapshot of grief and affection, suspended in the paradox of joy and death, the evangelist John has something to say about the body too. In this unlikely and unsettling portrait of discipleship John is preparing the body that gathered around the table with the Lord for the new life that will be expected of them as they too stare into his grave. He anoints the body with a vision of a community that is first and foremost, all other needs of the world aside, shaped by love and grounded in relationship with Christ. He is preparing the body to understand that to celebrate life with Christ they must also embrace the reality that our Savior will not spare even himself from suffering so there are preparations to be made. In their uncomfortable silence and in ours, John drives home his point that Christ desires intimacy, abandon, faithful service to him, and love. He wants our honest acknowledgment of who he is and where he is going. And he wants our attentive affection.

And so begins the loving, painful recitation of the last days of Christ life, played out before us once again. When death and life break bread together in the broken body of our Savior, and in a shattered jar of costly perfume. And as the crowds that gather around Jesus trade their palm branches for stones, we too, if we're being honest, begin to harden our hearts to the suffering, and turn our noses to the perfumes of the season to avoid the stench of the grave. But to truly anoint the wounds of Christ, as the body we must be prepared to let down our hair, pour out our wealth, get our hands dirty, and risk disgrace for the sake of him who loved us. We must be willing to risk intimacy, abandon, faithful service, and love. This is the sacrifice required of our king.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but it is the difference between lingering in our celebrations and looking the reality of suffering in the eye and tending to the body of Christ. In these difficult days that lead straight to the cross, Jesus asks only for a relationship with him. And coming from him, I don't think this is too much to ask. Amen.