

Death and New Life
(Fighting Stinky with Sweet)
Lent 5: John 12:1-8

King of Glory Lutheran
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April 5-6, 2025

¹ Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ² There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³ 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. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" ⁶ (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.) ⁷ Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." ⁸ You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

What will be our frivolous act of brazen, bold faith today? Which in Jesus' name will defy death and bring new life?

This story stinks. We so often focus on the wonderful smell of grace which Mary brings by anointing Jesus' feet...and we'll get there. But frankly, this story stinks.

St. John, the writer, intends it this way. It plays off Lazarus' death in the preceding chapter. And God bless Martha who reminds Jesus – who is wanting the tomb opened, 'He's been dead four days, Lord. There will be a stench!'

Desiring to celebrate Jesus' resuscitation of Lazarus, the siblings Mary, Martha and Lazarus have Jesus for dinner. But there is Judas. He too is seated around this lovely dinner table, with his pretend religiosity, his unfaithful deceit. Complaining about Mary's extravagant gift, Judas says. 'Oh, the money should've been given to the poor.'

Right?! Says the one who is currently stealing from the common collected funds of the disciples. Hypocrite. Charlatan. Pretending to care for the poor while syphoning off funds for himself. An early day Bernie Madoff. It stinks. Where death pushes in on pure, real life; it stinks.

I know none of you have ever done this because, well, you're perfect. But at times there appears in my refrigerator a container way back in the back. I've forgotten about the poor thing. It's a piece of fruit or a vegetable and you know...it doesn't look like it's former self. When I go to throw it away...whew! Can't believe I'm admitting this in front of foodies like you. Grab the lemon dish detergent...sweeten the smell. Where death pushes in on pure, real life; it stinks!

Then, of course, we can't forget our Lord Himself. He is headed to Jerusalem. The raising of Lazarus was the tipping point for the religious leaders to plot Jesus' downfall and death. While the wine glasses clink and the easy laughter of friends who are more like family, surround this feast, 'the outside world seeks to write a different story.' (Rev. Larissa Kwong Abazia) 'The outside world seeks to write a different story.'

You know that the media seeks to make us fearful. Yes? We know that on-line news sources use larger font in order that we have a visceral reaction to that headline. The actual event might be terrible. But terrible stories sell! And so the media wants to make us angry, or scared. The outside world seeks to write a different story. At the meeting where the City Council tabled the homeless shelter to be built in First Christian, a citizen said this. "Don't buy the story these clergy people are telling." God bless him. He doesn't know the hope that you and I have.

We have a story of hope! We have a story of extravagant grace! The only reason you and I are sitting here in this morning is because the early church chose to tell and retell and retell the story of Jesus death and resurrection and! We know that there are some who seek to write a different story than you and I, as Christians hold near and dear. We choose to live with bold hope, bold faith, walking by faith and not sight. It's not blind optimism or false idealism, or unrealistic rose-colored glasses. No, we know it down to the bottom of our souls, that everything in this world will pass away. But not Jesus. Not God. Not faith.

This is what Mary knew at that dinner party! Mary gets it. On a deep level, Mary understands death in a new way since her brother Lazarus. She knows the sting of death. Yet, Mary also understands that death is not permanent with Jesus. She knows new life will come. She might not yet know about Easter resurrection, but she has an inkling. On this night, she doesn't chose a death narrative. Mary chooses a death-defying narrative!

Thus, she does what she is compelled to do. A lavish, bold, stunning, frivolous, act of extravagant grace. Mary doesn't hide her faith in a drawer. In fact, in pouring

out the sweet-smelling nard on her Lord's feet, Mary is taking a significant risk. This is personal for her. Women didn't come close to men in public. Especially men that weren't their husbands.

Can we see her there? On the floor, wiping Jesus' feet with her hands. Then perhaps the perfume flows out too quickly, so she needs to catch it from falling on the floor with her hair. It looks inappropriate. But it's not. This act is of anointing is preparing her Lord's body for his death. Mary not only wants but needs to do all she can to get Jesus ready for the story the world is writing about him.

So she protests. She puts all of herself out there. Take it or leave it. 'This is a brazen act of beauty.' Writes Rev. Abazia, 'Beauty is resistance to death; beauty is an act of love. Her anointing of Jesus' feet is also a public act of worship. It is embodied, broken open, and poured out.'

Can we smell it? The fragrance fills the house. How can it not? Like the skin of a new-born. Like Grandma's chocolate chip cookies. Like walking by the perfume counter in Macy's. Like an orange when cutting it open. Sweet. Beautiful. Overpowering. God bless her! Mary fights stinky with sweet!

Here is my question for all of us. And here is your homework if you choose to accept it. How are we going to write a different narrative than the death narrative? How are we going to be lamplighters and push back the darkness? How are we going to be like Mary and do something frivolous, outrageous, extravagant, in protest or as an act of worship? I'm going to make a gift to World Hunger. Medicines and school children's supplies.

What will do you – be like Mary today!
Amen.