

DANCING IN THE DRAGON'S JAWS*

**This title was inspired by Bruce Cockburn's 1977 album of the same name.*

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary 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. ⁴But 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.) ⁷Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.' ⁹When 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. ¹⁰So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, ¹¹since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

(John 12:1-11, NRSV)

Don't you hate it when you go to the movies and people around you won't stop talking? Thomas Long, a preaching professor at Emory's School of Theology recounts one such occasion. He says, "One Saturday afternoon, my wife and I escaped to the movies. We had barely slipped into our seats and positioned the bucket of popcorn between us when a gaggle of teenagers jostled into the row behind us. They were having a great time together, noisily talking and teasing and laughing. During the previews, the conversation became even more animated as each kid weighed in on the merits of a coming attraction. Every so often I would turn around to dart a glance in their direction, a look I hoped would come across as a serious but not-too-parental appeal for theater courtesy. I was relieved when the opening credits of the feature finally started to roll and the group quieted down. But not for long. One of the teenagers had evidently already seen the movie, and was eager to serve as plot guide for the others. 'Omigosh,' she

croaked in a stage whisper, as the male protagonist made his first appearance, ‘he is going to like fall for her so-o-o hard.’ Now my wife and I had guessed that there might be a romantic spark between the male and female leads, this being the movies and all, but it would have been nice to watch it unfold ourselves. ‘Look, look,’ our cinematic herald shrieked a few moments later, ‘he forgot to put the key back under the mat. Did’ja see that? That’s how the cops are gonna catch him!’ With one huge ‘whoosh,’ all dramatic suspense rushed out of the room” (*The Christian Century*, March 14, 2001, p. 11).

In today’s scripture lesson from the Gospel of John, something similar is happening, a juxtaposition of events, a foreshadowing of things to come. Long puts it this way, “Mary is anointing Jesus, and at first the narrator seems like the teenager in the theater who was providing play-by-play commentary. Notice the whispered asides. ‘Look,’ John [the Gospel writer] confides, turning around with his box of popcorn, ‘there’s Lazarus! He was raised from the dead in the prequel.’ Or he hisses, ‘Hey, keep your eye on that guy Judas! He’s about to betray Jesus!’ And, ‘Don’t believe a word of that caring-for-the-poor stuff. Judas is really a thief!’” (Ibid.).

All of this forewarning, all of these hints of things to come during Holy Week can bring on feelings of anxiety. Something tragic is just around the corner. Soon the storm clouds will gather. And yet in today’s text we hear of something quite the opposite—a celebratory dinner party, a joyous gathering hosted by two sisters, Mary and Martha. Their cause for celebration was nothing short of a miracle. In the previous chapter, John writes about the miracle Jesus performed by raising his good friend Lazarus from the dead.

He tells us that Mary and Martha had known how sick their brother Lazarus was and sent for their friend Jesus to come at once. But by the time Jesus approached Bethany, their hometown, Lazarus had been dead four days. Martha, the strong and stoic of the two sisters, came out to meet Jesus and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask.” She then went home to tell Mary that Jesus was there.

Broken from her grief, Mary approached Jesus. She knelt at his feet and said, “Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died.” Jesus looked down and saw her weeping. The scriptures say he was deeply moved and began to weep himself. This is the only place in the Bible that we find Jesus moved to tears. And I find this among the most meaningful moments in the life of Christ. The Son of God weeping with his friends over the loss of a dear friend. Perhaps the idea of the miracle had not yet occurred to him. Perhaps he wept because he would raise only Lazarus, while so many others wept that day as well. Maybe he wept because he knew the handwriting was on the wall and his own death was not far away. And maybe he just wept because the world was as it was—full of pain and suffering, tears and disease. Jesus had known plenty of happiness: blessing the children, feeding the 5000, laughing late at night with his friends, but for now Jesus wept.

The story continues that Jesus asked to be taken to Lazarus' tomb. "Take away the stone," Jesus said. Ever practical, Martha protested that the stench would be too great. But Jesus overruled her and the tomb was opened. After saying a prayer Jesus shouted, "Lazarus, come out!" Still wrapped in his grave clothes from head to toe, Lazarus staggered out of the tomb alive. Never before had anyone seen such a miracle, a dead man brought to life by the words and the prayer of a wandering rabbi.

From death to life. From tears to astonishment. From grief to joy. This is the story behind the story. This is why in today's text Mary, Martha, and Lazarus are having the party of their lives.

I like to picture this happy group gathered around the table. First there's Martha, well meaning and industrious. Martha is best known for that other dinner when she got onto Mary for talking to Jesus instead of helping her out in the kitchen. Martha was always practical. She would rather set the table than carry on a conversation. Her attention to detail made her the perfect hostess. Martha showed her devotion to Jesus through practical, hands-on service. Even though she often gets a bum rap, our church and our world need the Marthas of this world who jump in with both feet and get the job done.

And then there is Lazarus. Lazarus is a man who has seen it all and has the stories and scars to prove it. Like the crew of the starship *Enterprise*, he had gone where no man had gone before. He had lived death, so to speak, and thanks to Jesus, was alive again to tell about it.

You might be wondering at this point what the difference was between this miracle and the miracle of Easter Sunday. Lazarus was brought back to life, but he was not resurrected. He had his mortal body back, not a transformed spiritual body. Unlike Jesus, Lazarus eventually died again and that time it was for keeps. Nevertheless, Lazarus was surely thankful for his miraculous new life. No doubt he had a new perspective that stayed with him for the rest of his days.

And then there was Mary; she was all heart. In today's scripture lesson, we find her anointing Jesus' feet not with a few ounces, but with an entire pound of expensive, perfumed ointment. To anoint means to cover an object or part of the body such as the head with oil or ointment as a sign that the person or thing was consecrated or set aside for a holy purpose. Sometimes those in need of healing were anointed and blessed with prayers. After death, bodies were anointed in preparation for burial. Anointing was a common practice of the day. When Mary anointed Jesus however, it was far from the norm. In fact, it was extravagant in two different ways. First, there was the cost of the ointment itself, and second there was the cost of bucking the system. When Mary took Jesus' feet in her hands and wiped them with her hair, she broke the customs of her day. Women were not allowed to touch a man in public or let their hair down in front of others. But Mary's devotion to Jesus, her gratefulness for bringing Lazarus back to life, her wonder at the presence of God she sensed in him must have overwhelmed her to the point that she ignored convention. And while there was nothing unusual about anointing

someone's head as a sign of honor, the fact that Mary anointed Jesus' feet points to her humility (William Barclay, *The Gospel of John Vol. II*, p. 110).

Eventually Judas gets fed up and criticizes Mary saying that the ointment could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Knowing what Judas does within the next week, we shouldn't be surprised to learn that he was *not* in fact thinking of others when criticizing Mary. The text tells us that Judas wasn't really interested in the poor at all. It seems that as the disciples' treasurer, he had been on the take and simply saw this as a missed opportunity to further line his pockets. But even more than a comment on his greed, I see Judas' objection as a clue that he was entirely out of his element. He could not comprehend Mary's act because he did not share her devotion and dedication to Jesus.

And what did Jesus, the guest of honor, make of all this fuss? It seems like if anybody would have agreed with Judas, it would have been Jesus, because throughout his ministry he constantly showed a heart of compassion toward the world's needy. But always full of surprises, Jesus defended Mary against Judas saying, "Let her alone, let her keep it for the day of my burial. The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me." Right off the bat Jesus tells Judas to back off and leave Mary alone. While he suggested that some of it be saved for the day of his burial, he did not reject Mary's gift or betray her vulnerability. He received both the gift and the giver with grace.

What are we to make about the part of the verse where Jesus says, "the poor you will always have with you"? Obviously he didn't want things this way. His examples and teachings show us time and time again that we can and should make a difference in our world. I think he was merely stating a fact, that the reality of the human heart yields a world that will always contain the haves and the have-nots. He also pointed out that they would not always have *him* with them. That they should take every advantage of his presence. That this opportunity would not come again.

Next Sunday is Palm Sunday, the day we celebrate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem right before everything fell apart. Without knowing it, Mary was anointing Jesus in advance for what was to come. It was in fact the only anointing he ever received. On Good Friday his friends hurriedly removed his body from the cross before the Sabbath began. There was no time to anoint his body and properly prepare it for burial. And you'll recall that is the exact task the women were going to do on that miraculous Easter morning when they found the empty tomb, but we'll wait a couple of weeks for that sermon.

In the meantime we have this joyous dinner party at Mary and Martha's full of whispers and hints of things to come. Evil lurked around the corner, but for now they brought out the best wine and used the good china. For now they smiled and laughed savoring life, especially the life of Lazarus. No doubt Jesus savored it all too. No doubt he made the most of this last gathering in the house of his dear friends. No doubt he felt joy in his heart despite impending doom. For the moment he might not have cared. For

the moment perhaps the party provided momentary relief. For the moment he was “dancing in the dragon’s jaws” because he knew that whatever befell him, God was good and could be trusted.

Richard Lischer, a preaching professor at Duke Divinity School, tells the story of his friend who “had already done two full courses of chemotherapy and through it all had somehow managed to complete a doctoral dissertation...To celebrate she and her husband rented a VFW hall, hired a band, and [planned] one of the biggest parties I’ve ever seen for the whole church and half the community. Two days before graduation her doctors confirmed that the cancer was back. The experimental treatments would begin the day after graduation. Only a few of us knew it, and my guess [was that] we would...[limp] through the ceremony and [cancel] the party. But she had the party. And I tell you I have never heard the gospel of God’s Yes preached more powerfully than I saw it danced on the floor of the VFW. An outsider would have seen only the vintage 1960s, arthritic gyrations that we were all doing, but this was a woman of faith and she danced her Yes in the grip of the No...The best celebrating is done in the face of the enemy, the best dancing on the devil’s dance floor.”
(http://maryhinkle.typepad.com/pilgrim_preaching/lent/).

Wherever you find yourself this morning, full of life’s joy or fighting life’s battles, remember that Jesus danced in the dragon’s jaws, in the face of imminent danger, in the face of sure death. Today Jesus invites all of us to join in the dance of faith, the dance of hope, believing that God is ultimately stronger than any dragon, any disease, or any discouragement that may come our way. Shall we dance? AMEN.

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PASTORAL PRAYER

Most merciful God, people need your help in many corners of our world. In corners where we may never go human rights are trampled, people go hungry, people live without hope. Motivate us, motivate governments, motivate the “haves” of the world to

join together and make a difference. In our own sanctuary today, some of us have hidden corners of our hearts full of sadness, griefs that haven't healed, regrets about things that did or did not happen. Heal these hidden hurts, O God. Inspire us to hope in the face of the unknown. Inspire us to keep the faith in the face of doubts. Inspire us to keep loving in the face of so much that is seemingly unlovable. Fill us with your Spirit and keep us close to you throughout the coming week. Through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray.
AMEN.