



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick

5th Sunday in Lent April 7, 2019

Sermon Title: "The Holy Present Moment"

Texts: Isaiah 43:16-21 and John 12:1-8

"May those who sow in tears, reap with shouts of joy." These are words spoken in our psalm where people are remembering together what great things God HAS done, while praying that God will do so again. But as anyone who has ever planted seeds, or young shoots will tell you, that the time between sowing and reaping feels long. And in the in between there is much uncertainty. Will we in fact celebrate harvest joy to carry home, or will we be left shaking our heads and lamenting, "we had hoped?" So much of our time is between seasons of sowing and reaping, between the past and the future. It is our very nature to ruminate or pore over the past sometimes, or to allow our worst fears and greatest energies to fixate on the future. A little of this is survival instinct, but a lot of it, adds nothing to our existence. The one thing we so often breeze right past is the present moment in which we find ourselves. We even say we want to live in the present moment, but we rarely do.

Jesus has come to see Lazarus, and Mary and Martha on his way to Jerusalem, returning from the wilderness where he went after having raised Lazarus from the dead. Can you imagine all of the tears that were sowed in the days when Lazarus was sick and then died, but before Jesus came? A time that tested faith for sure. Now here they are, having dinner with Lazarus sitting at the table, as he always had, with Martha serving as usual. It ought to be nothing short of an all-out celebration, and I am sure there were joyous feelings. For Lazarus every new moment is savored perhaps like never before. But at the same time, there was so much else going on in the house, that we wouldn't necessarily put together without stepping back for a moment.

You see, after Jesus has raised Lazarus, it has created a stir and there are crowds of people looking for Jesus- some are amazed and curious to follow him. Others are enraged and want to arrest him, even eliminate him. Some even think they ought to kill Lazarus too for making such a scene. So chaotic was the scene that Jesus has gone into hiding in the wilderness and no longer went about the towns and villages.

And people are asking amongst themselves, “Do you think he will even try to go to Jerusalem for the Passover?” Better to play it safe perhaps. Yet, here comes Jesus to see Lazarus in Bethany, the last real stop on the road to Jerusalem. Knowing this, don’t we have to wonder what that room was really like that night? Just imagine all of the emotions, ranging from fear for lives, anger, doubt, bitterness. Probably disappointment. I bet the tension in that room was pretty high and the words fill up the room.

Do you think anyone even noticed Mary?

I bet no one realized she had gotten up and returned with a stone jar. Or that she had sat at Jesus’ feet, because Mary was always sitting at Jesus’ feet. I bet no one even saw her let down her long hair. I think the first thing that jarred anyone out of the distracted rehashing and fretting about Jesus and what he ought to do was the scent of the perfume when the jar was opened.

Then they are jarred from their preoccupation to see Mary, anointing Jesus’ feet, with tears flowing, and wiping his feet with her hair. Wordlessly pouring out her devotion to her Lord, who has himself been devoted enough to stop by one last time on the way to Jerusalem. “A scent can cause us to remember the beauty of the soul, to remind us of our deepest being. Isn’t smell the most intimate of the senses? We breathe it deeply and take it into our very heart.”

(Gunilla Norris, Embracing the Seasons, Memories of a Country Garden)

This moment between Mary and Jesus is holy, and sacred. Between the past and the future, between the sowing and the reaping, is this moment. Perhaps Mary spends this extravagance in thanksgiving for what has already happened in the raising of her father. Or perhaps she spends this extravagance for the celebration of this moment in the presence of her Lord as a sacrament, as a holy sign. This moment is one of intimacy with God, moving beyond conversation to communion.

Mary extravagantly abandons herself, breaking open and pouring out that which could be life for her. Let’s be honest, if the religious leaders succeed in killing her father, Lazarus, that expensive perfume could have been sold for her own needs and that of Martha. They would be the poor. But rather than hold tightly to those fears, she pours out what she has in unbridled devotion and worship.

Jean-Pierre de Caussade, wrote a tiny gem of a book entitled *The Sacrament of the Present Moment* in which he writes, “If we wish to be united to God we should value all the operations of his grace, but we should cling only to the duties of the present moment...If we have abandoned ourselves to God, there is only one rule for us: the duty of the present moment...”

The books the Holy Spirit is writing are living, and every soul a volume in which the divine author makes a true revelation of his word, explaining it to every heart, unfolding it in every moment.”

Six days before the Passover, she wiped Jesus’ feet with her hair, as the fragrance filled the house and silenced the words in the air. Before long, Jesus will hang on a cross, and Mary will wonder if all she has left is that lingering faint scent as she remembers him. But I believe this story is told not only so that we will believe, as all of John is, but so that we can believe even when all we see between sowing and reaping is great darkness before dawn, and little to cling to. Perhaps the gospel is that Jesus’ devotion to come to those he loves is best seen in the present moments that we might brush by, but where God is ready to be found when we stop and breathe in.