

# A Deeper Journey

## THE FRAGRANCE OF LOVE REMEMBERED

Today we reflect on one of the rare stories that is found in all four Gospels: Jesus' anointing at Bethany. Although there is some debate about the differences in these accounts, author Daniel Lai has chosen to blend them into one story for our purposes.

Take a moment to become still. Let the silence deepen within you and around you. Read reflectively John 12:1-6 and Matthew 26:10-13.

### John 12:1-6

<sup>1</sup>Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup>Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. <sup>3</sup>Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

<sup>4</sup>But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, <sup>5</sup>"Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." <sup>6</sup>He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.



### Matthew 26:10-13

<sup>10</sup>Aware of this, Jesus said to them, "Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. <sup>11</sup>The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. <sup>12</sup>When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. <sup>13</sup>Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

Imagine Jesus arriving in Bethany the week before His crucifixion. He has history here in this little suburb of Jerusalem, just a few miles from the capital city. His dear friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus live here. He raised Lazarus from the dead here, perhaps his greatest miracle, and after Jesus' own resurrection, this is where Jesus will give His last blessing to His disciples and ascend into heaven. Jesus seemed to love Bethany. Perhaps it was the company of trusted friends that He liked, away from the crowds and noise of the big city. Perhaps He sought solace in the quiet of Bethany after he debated with Pharisees and delivered prophecies to the masses in Jerusalem. I like to think that

withdrawing to Bethany was a respite for Him, a chance to rest from the rigors of ministry, before re-entering the fray.

*Take a moment to reflect.* Take some deep breaths and become restful in your body to help your mind remember. What is your Bethany? Perhaps it is a place where you have experienced rest and renewal. Perhaps it is a person with whom you feel safe and known and have freedom to be your true self. What comes to mind for you in these moments? Give thanks for whom or what God has provided for you; or speak with Him honestly about your need. Become more fully present with Jesus in His place of respite with friends.

In Bethany, Jesus sits down to a meal. It is the last one He will eat in this village with these friends. I imagine

Jesus soaking in every moment, savoring everything with a mixture of gladness and sadness. He knows that after today the events of His life will hasten towards His crucifixion, like a train that has left the station, gathering speed until it cannot be stopped. It is all going to change so quickly and will never be the same. This dinner is a moment of normalcy that will soon be washed away. I wonder what Jesus felt as His friends ate, talked and laughed around the table, not understanding what the future held for Him. Did He feel alone? Did anyone else understand?

*What is your Bethany?*

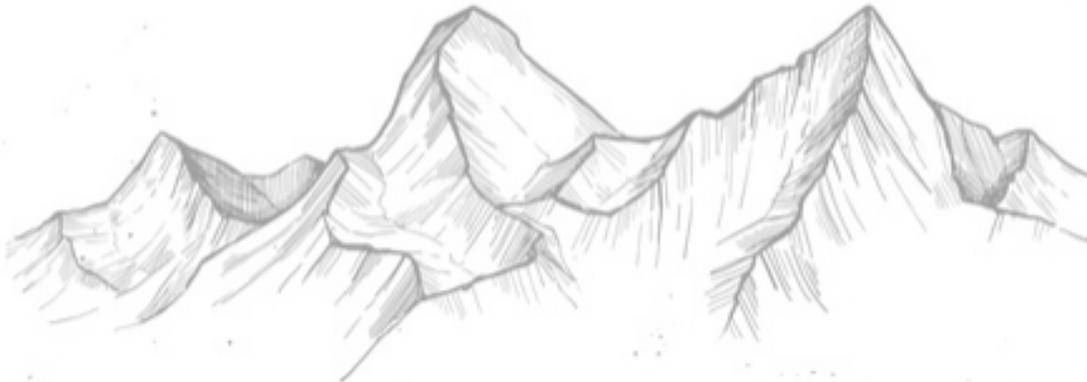
Mary seems to understand what this moment means. This is the Mary who

sat at Jesus' feet listening to all that He was saying (Luke 10:39), so much so that many have called her the first woman disciple. This is the Mary who later would not come out to greet Jesus when he arrived too late to save her brother Lazarus (John 11:20). This is the Mary who, when Jesus called for her, stood face to face with Him and uttered the words that anyone who has lost a family member too soon can understand: "Lord, if you had been here..." (John 11:32). This is the Mary who would witness Jesus moments later, with tears in His eyes, bringing her brother back from the dead, the weeping Savior (John 11:43). Mary was a true follower of Christ, one who had been through the ups and downs with her Lord. Her faith was weathered and worn, yet still strong, like broken-in leather.

Perhaps it should not surprise us that Mary, who had been through the trials and tribulations of faith, understood better than anyone else what this dinner meant to Jesus. In the middle of the meal, she brings out a jar of expensive perfume from the Far East (nard was native to India and the Himalayas), and anoints Jesus with it, pouring it on his head and feet (Matt. 26:7; John 12:3). Where a single drop of this perfume would have lasted for days, Mary pours out the whole bottle. Judas protests that the perfume is worth “a year’s wages” or \$17,400 at today’s federal minimum wage. Mary held nothing back, mirroring the fullness of her devotion and commitment. It was as if she was saying to Jesus, “I know that You are giving Your all. I will do the same. I am with You fully to the end.”

Mary begins to weep in these moments, her tears mixing with the perfume. As the fragrance fills the whole house, Mary, who is already breaking social norms by touching a man, does something unthinkable for any upstanding Middle Eastern woman: she uncovers her hair, using it to soak up her tears and the excess perfume on Jesus’ body. The significance would not be lost on the onlookers, for in that culture a woman would only uncover and let down her hair on her wedding night, to be seen for the first time by her husband. It is a moment of jaw-dropping personal intimacy that would have made the others in attendance gasp and avert their eyes.

*Take a moment to notice:* What stirs in you as you witness Mary’s lavish love for Jesus? A longing? A discomfort? Maybe an unexpected emotion? Articulate to Jesus what you are noticing, as best you can.



The shock of this is too much for some of the dinner guests to bear. They complain to Jesus of the inappropriateness of the situation, objecting on the grounds of social justice: “This perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor!” But Jesus will not allow the idea of the poor to detract from the person who is right in front of Him, who is poor in spirit and has now made herself poor in wealth. He defends Mary:

*“Leave her alone! Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing for me. You will always have the poor with you. And whenever you want to, you can give to them. But you won’t always have me here with you. She has done all she could by pouring perfume on my body to prepare it for burial. You may be sure that wherever the good news is told all over the world, people will remember what she has done.”* (Mark 14:6-9 CEV)

Here Jesus does three remarkable things:

- 1) **He creates space for Mary.** Her actions pushed the boundaries of financial responsibility and cultural civility, yet Jesus accepts the gift of her anointing and then publicly (and privately in Luke) affirms her. He allows Mary to express her love and willingly joins her in the moment, thus creating a memory with her. Any good rabbi would have been well within his rights, even his duty, to reject this untoward offering. Jesus accepts it with grace and then defends Mary against those who would attack her, putting His own reputation and public standing at risk by doing so. Jesus gives us a lesson on how to create space for others: accept them as they are; affirm them publicly and privately; vigorously defend them.
- 2) **He creates space for Himself.** This seems counterintuitive for one who made a habit of giving his life away even unto death, but Jesus teaches us that there are moments when it is appropriate to consider one’s self, whether by accepting an extravagant gift or by allowing someone to love you. His words, “You will always have the poor with you but you won’t always have me with you,” remind us that, in this moment, Jesus himself is in need of care. Later He will specifically express His needs in Gethsemane when He says to Peter, James and John, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me,” (Matthew 26:38 NIV). Jesus gives us a wonderful example of a leader creating space for his or her own needs.
- 3) **He memorializes Mary.** Jesus declares that Mary’s actions will be remembered throughout the world, “wherever the good news is told.” This is true in a literal sense (this story appears in all four Gospels) and in a figurative sense in that sacrifice and love lie at the core of the Christian message.



There is another sense in which the actions of Mary will be remembered: by Jesus Himself on the cross. By the potency of the perfume and the sheer volume that was applied to His hair, feet and body, the fragrance would surely have remained on Him as He hung on the cross only a few days later.

Scientists tell us that, out of all the senses, the sense of smell is the one most closely linked with memory. I believe that as Jesus was beaten, whipped, and crucified, the sweet smell of the perfume that lingered in His hair would have reminded Him of this sweet moment with Mary, and perhaps offered Him a small measure of comfort. That smell would still be on His body as He was buried in the tomb. Was it still with Him on Easter morning? Did He carry the fragrance with Him on whatever other-worldly paths he treaded between His death and resurrection? Does Jesus still carry the fragrance of Mary's love today?

Mary too, would remember this moment, as the perfume would have also stayed in her hair. As she watched all those terrible things happen to Jesus, the smell of the perfume would remind her of their last time together. Thus these dear friends would stay connected through all that would come between them, even death, through the fragrant memory of lavish love.



### *Remembering God's Goodness Together*

Over these last several weeks we have explored what it means to remember Christ and be re-membered by him, and now the embodied gift of memory travels with us all the way to the cross and to the tomb.

Take a few moments to remember. As we approach the death and resurrection of Jesus this week, pause and look back over the road behind you. Perhaps you, like Mary, have been through ups and downs with Jesus. Perhaps you have been to the heights of faith and devotion and the depths of grief and confusion. Perhaps you have cried with Jesus, been disappointed by Jesus and amazed by Jesus. Perhaps your faith is like hers, as well-worn as old leather, strong yet softer than it used to be. If you were at this meal in Bethany with Jesus, what would you want Him to know about your journey together thus far?

What would you like to say to Him, give to Him or do for Him to help prepare Him for burial?

Perhaps take some time to write out what you would like Jesus to carry with Him from you as He heads toward the cross. If you have access to fragrant oil or perfume, consider keeping it near or on your body as a reminder of the love you share with Jesus in these next few days.

## *Remembering God's Goodness Together: Daily Engagement*

Maundy Thursday:

Do This In Remembrance Of Me

Take a moment to settle your mind, body and heart with some deep breaths.

What do you want out of this time of reflection? Offer your desire to God and ask him to help you.

Read Luke 22:14-20 slowly, a couple of times.

In the Last Supper, Jesus gives his disciples and all who would follow after them a great gift: a way to remember him and thus be re-membered by the giving and receiving of bread and wine. The simplicity and accessibility of the practice belies its genius. It is spiritual, physical and communal, encompassing every aspect of the human being. It is both a Sacrament and a daily routine (eating and drinking), so that Christ may be remembered in both the ceremony and the commonplace meal. The practice itself brings us into close communion with Christ as His body and blood become a part of our body and blood.

In his book *With Burning Hearts: A Meditation on the Eucharistic Life*, Henri Nouwen writes,

*"The word 'Eucharist' means literally 'act of thanksgiving.' To celebrate the Eucharist and to live a Eucharistic life has everything to do with gratitude. Living Eucharistically is living life as a gift, a gift for which one is grateful. But gratitude is not the most obvious response to life, certainly not when we experience life as a series of losses! Still,*

*the great mystery we celebrate in the Eucharist and live in a Eucharistic life is precisely that through mourning our losses we come to know life as a gift."*

Nouwen extends the ceremony of the Eucharist into a way of life characterized by gratitude. Gratitude and loss are two sides of the same mysterious coin. During the pandemic we all have experienced loss and we all have been given gifts.

Take a moment to name the losses you've experienced lately before the Lord...

*I lost a friend who died suddenly and unexpectedly.*

*I lost one last camp trip with my senior Young Life kids.*

*I lost a volleyball season and a basketball season as a coach.*

*I lost a year of being with my young nephews, one whom I haven't yet hugged.*

Now take a moment to name the gifts you've been given lately...

*I've been home for dinner every night for the past year.*

*I've been able to read all the books of the Chronicles of Narnia and all the books of the Lord of the Rings with my sons.*

*I've been able to know my Young Life kids in a different, deeper way.*

In remembering our losses and gifts in the name of Jesus, may our souls be re-membered. Amen.

Good Friday: Remember Me When You Come Into Your Kingdom

Place your hand on your heart as you pray this prayer, as a sign of your solidarity with Christ in his suffering:

(From the Book of Common Prayer)

*Almighty God, we pray that you would graciously hold us, your family, for whom our Lord Jesus Christ was willing to be betrayed, and given into the hands of sinners, and to suffer death upon the cross; who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

Read Luke 23:32-43 slowly and prayerfully.

The two men crucified on either side of Jesus have been called “thieves,” although a better translation of the Greek word might be “criminals,” as some translations now reflect. When I traveled to Israel a few years ago, I learned that these men could not have been common criminals, since crucifixion was reserved only for those of whom the government wanted to make an example. Criminals arrested for stealing were not crucified. More likely they were “zealots” or “revolutionaries,” who attempted to overthrow or disrupt the government. We could call them “insurrectionists,” which carries a weighted meaning in America today.

These insurrectionists are crucified with Jesus because, like Jesus, their slow and tortuous deaths at the hands of the state are meant to teach a lesson: “Don’t mess with the Roman empire!”

One insurrectionist is stubborn, holding fast to his rebellion even as he hangs on a cross. He repeatedly insults Jesus and mocks him. Jesus responds with an astounding prayer of grace: “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”



The other insurrectionist is repentant and stands up for Jesus while acknowledging his own wrongdoing: “We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man hasn’t done anything wrong.” Then the repentant insurrectionist turns and speaks to Jesus directly: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.” It is an audacious request in light of the circumstances.

Yet Jesus’ response is even more audacious: “I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise.” Jesus one-ups the insurrectionist!

This is the scandalous grace of Christ: it requires no solid proof of repentance, no track record of a reformed life, but instead immediately offers forgiveness and instant access to heaven, with the Son himself as one's wingman no less! Of course Jesus knows the human heart and can divinely sense this man's authenticity. Still, an eternity in heaven for a lifetime of sin with one moment of repentance tacked on the end doesn't seem like justice. Just as Jesus upended tables in the Temple, his grace upends the scales of justice. To the righteous, it is offensive. To the sinful, it is good news!

Very soon, these insurrectionists' legs will be broken to hasten their suffocation, and Jesus will be stabbed with a spear to ensure his death. Yet while they all are being physically dis-membered Jesus is spiritually re-membering all the people around him with forgiveness and grace (see John 19:26-27). It is not just the resurrection that is miraculous; the way that Jesus died is equally so.

Take a moment to reflect: What is Jesus' scandalous grace inviting you to consider today?

To accept his forgiveness and, in turn, forgive yourself? To forgive others who seem undeserving of grace? To make an audacious request of Christ? (You can never out-audacious God!) To express your gratitude? Take some time to step into that invitation, whatever it may be.

#### Holy Saturday: Remembering To Keep Watch

Saturday of Holy Week, the day before resurrection Sunday, is a threshold where one reality is ending and another has yet to begin. Jesus had died but had not yet been resurrected. By all accounts, Christ's followers spent this day sequestered away together. It was a day of waiting and watching. It was a day of grieving and lamenting. It was a day of hiding and crying.

A few months ago a staff couple in our region had complications with their pregnancy. The baby was delivered but would not survive. The news went out over our group text one night. Pandemic restrictions prohibited visitors in the hospital, so some of our staff drove to the hospital parking lot and sat in their cars and prayed, and watched, and cried on their behalf, holding private vigil for them.

Vigil, the practice of staying awake in the night to watch and pray, was Jesus' most personal request of his disciples:

*"Then Jesus went with them to the olive grove called Gethsemane, and he said, 'Sit here while I go over there to pray.' He took Peter and Zebedee's two sons, James and John, and he became anguished and distressed. He told them, 'My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.'" (Matthew 26:36-38 NLT)*



Peter, James, and John infamously failed in this, falling asleep multiple times. Twenty four hours later, Jesus was dead and laid in a tomb, and the disciples again held vigil, this time for themselves. Their dreams dashed, their hopes crushed, their hearts broken, and their belief seemingly empty, they sat in darkness, literal, emotional, and spiritual.

Easter Vigil is a service traditionally held during the night before Easter until sunrise on Easter morning. The service gives attenders the opportunity to both celebrate the coming of Christ our Light, who illuminates spiritual darkness, and to be in solidarity with those of us who sit in emotional and psychological darkness, with which Jesus was well acquainted. Holy Saturday is just as essential as Easter Sunday, for darkness is as real as light, and it even touched our Lord. If it did him, how much more so us?

Darkness is a legitimate part of the Christian experience. In creation, the Spirit hovered over the darkness before God spoke the words, "Let there be light." Before the light of Christ's resurrection was the darkness of the tomb. Holy Saturday acknowledges the reality of this darkness, and entreats the Lord for the strength to endure it.

Take some time to reflect: Turn out the lights and/or close the curtains if possible as a way to remind yourself of the darkness that precedes the light, or simply close your eyes. Cross both arms over your chest, as a symbol of solidarity for those that sit now in darkness: those who are anguished, distressed, crushed, grieving, feeling close to death. If you find yourself in this type of darkness, cross your arms over your chest as a way to remind yourself that Christ is holding you together.

Though light is coming, it seems like it will never get here.  
When you can't imagine a way out,  
When you feel like you're sinking deeper and deeper,  
When you don't think you'll make it,  
Jesus is holding you.

Take some time to hold vigil for others you know need help, praying and watching over them.

Take some time to allow yourself to be held by Jesus as you sit in the darkness. Pray for the strength to make it to Son-rise.



Easter Sunday: He is risen!

He is risen, indeed! Those are the only words we will post on this most glorious day! Enjoy celebrating the resurrected Body of Christ with the living Body of Christ in your own community today! Rejoice! Laugh! Sing, eat and play! Tomorrow we will post an Easter reflection and celebrate with new posts all week long. See you then!