

John 12:1-8

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 Iscariot, 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."

Sermon 3/21/10 by Susi Kawolics

*An excerpt from the journal of Mary, sister of Lazarus and Martha*

I just heard the terrible news. Jesus, our teacher, our friend, is dead. They crucified him like a common criminal. I can barely believe it. But ever since he raised my brother Lazarus from the dead, I knew his enemies were closing in on him. That act of love, that miracle of bringing a dead man back to life was his undoing in the end. Because it was on the day of that miracle that his enemies began to plot his death. They were just waiting for the perfect opportunity.

Our family had come to know and love Jesus. We first met him a few years ago. He would come to our house for dinner whenever he was passing through the area. From the first time I saw and heard him, I knew in my gut that there was something special about him. I've always been that kind of intuitive person, a bit dreamy, impulsive, with my head in the stars. My sister Martha sometimes gets angry with me because I am terrible at doing the daily household chores, at keeping house, at entertaining.

I remember the one time Jesus came over, and I was trying to help my sister, who has always been so practical, well organized, and a master of hospitality. We were working on getting everything ready for dinner. But my mind was elsewhere. My thoughts just kept wandering. I kept going over all the things I'd heard Jesus say. They were so different than what I grew up believing. He completely turned so many of my beliefs upside down. He said that the Jewish law was important, yet he was in violation of it when he healed people on the Sabbath, when he touched and cured lepers. He was a respected rabbi, yet he had friends who were tax collectors and prostitutes. He even talked to and respected women, and non-Jewish women at that.

He claimed to be God's son, to be the long-awaited Messiah, the one I and all my people had been waiting for for so long. We wanted so badly to be freed from captivity, to be saved from our enemies. Yet Jesus claimed that he would save us through love rather than violence, through peace and sacrifice rather than through war and conquering. When he taught us about God it sounded as if God really cared for us, each one of us, personally. He even called God "Abba" - that affectionate word children use for their fathers. At first I was appalled! It sounded so disrespectful. Yet, the more I reflected on these things, the more I began to

form a new picture of who God was, and a sense of what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah, and for me to be his follower.

So on that day when we knew he was coming for dinner, these new thoughts were racing through my mind. I wanted to hear more, to discuss these ideas in depth, to make sense of it all. I was in the kitchen trying to help my sister Martha. Poor Martha, she was beginning to get impatient with me. I kept losing my attention – dropping dishes, burning food, not listening to what she asked me to do. And when Jesus actually arrived, I kept going out to where he was with the other men on the pretense of bringing them food. Then I'd just casually stay there, trying not to be noticed, because I wanted to hear what he had to say. Finally, I couldn't tear myself away and I just sat down at Jesus' feet and listened to him. I didn't even think about what this would look like to the others who were there. What I did was totally inappropriate for a woman, yet Jesus didn't mind. He actually said it was good for me to be there. Martha was a bit annoyed, but thank goodness we had her. She put together a wonderful meal without my help, served it and did all things needed to provide excellent hospitality.

Jesus had become a really good friend of ours, but we never knew when he'd be around. He traveled all over, teaching, healing, performing miracles. So when Lazarus got really sick a few weeks ago, we tried to get word to Jesus. We needed him to come, because we just knew he could cure him. But he didn't show up in time, and our dear brother died.

When he finally did arrive, it was four days after that! We felt really hurt and betrayed, and were sure he didn't care about us as much as we had thought he did. But then, he actually wept at Lazarus' death. He wept! That's how we knew that he really did love us. And then he did the most extraordinary thing. He called for our brother to come out of the tomb. We thought he was crazy. Sometimes grief makes people do things that are irrational, and we figured this was the only explanation. But then, we could barely believe it – Lazarus did come out. He came walking out of that tomb! Can you imagine?! After four days, he came out and was alive. We were delirious with joy! All of us – our friends and relatives - we were so grateful, so happy to have Lazarus back. There were a lot of people around, and I could tell they were really impressed, and they started believing in Jesus because of this miracle, and wanting to follow him.

But out of the corner of my eye, I could see some of Jesus' enemies whispering to each other. They were angry, they were worried and scared, and they seemed to be plotting something. I had the sense that this miracle was the last straw for them. These leaders knew that this incident would gain Jesus so many more followers, and it gave them the motivation they needed to put a stop to him.

After this, Jesus actually withdrew from the public eye, going to a secluded place with his disciples for a while. But then, as Passover neared, we figured he would head to Jerusalem, and maybe stop and see us again, since Bethany is only a few miles outside of Jerusalem.

And sure enough, he did come. Still ecstatic about having our brother back, and now having Jesus visit again with his disciples, the atmosphere in our household was so joyous. But when I actually saw Jesus, I noticed something in his eyes, some profound sadness, pain, or fright. I could just tell that some kind of anguish was tormenting him deep inside.

I was trying to help Martha in the kitchen. But as usual, I got distracted. Out of the blue, I suddenly thought about the jar of really expensive anointing oil we had in the house. For some reason, I just knew I had to get it and give it to Jesus. Impulsively, I ran out of the kitchen, retrieved it, and went into the room where all the men were gathered. And then, without even thinking, I broke the seal and anointed his feet.

Well, suddenly, the whole room was filled with the fragrance of that oil, with the smell of nard. Everything and everyone got perfectly still. I think I was just as surprised and overwhelmed by my actions as Jesus and the others in the room were. Here I was, pouring this oil over his feet, this perfume that was worth about a year's wages. And for no good logical reason!

Most people thought I was out of my mind, that what I did was totally inappropriate. Some judged me immediately as wasteful. Judas especially was not happy with me. And rationally, I guess it was not a good decision – Jesus always talked about caring for the poor, and here I was, using this oil for no practical purpose at all when we could have bought so much food with the money! For a moment, I was afraid maybe Jesus would be mad at me for this as well.

But he wasn't. Not at all. He looked at me with the most tender expression, with such compassion and love, and he told the others to leave me alone. He understood, probably better than I did myself, the meaning of the gesture. Maybe deep down I knew too that this would be the last time I'd see him – that if I wanted to do something to show my deep love for him, I'd have to do it now. He said I was anticipating and honoring the day of his burial.

After that, I guess I knew it wouldn't be long before his enemies caught up with him. What I did for him that night, I did out of my love for him. What I gave him was a gift from the bottom of my heart. Though a treasure, it was still only a jar of nard. What Jesus did when he died, he did out of his love for all of us. He gave not only his heart, but he gave his life. He didn't hold back anything at all.

When his enemies crucified him – it was horrendous. They tortured him, they mocked him, then they murdered him. Yet he did not sway from his convictions, he did not lash out in anger, he did not fight back. He let himself be crucified. And then, in the ultimate act of love, he asked God to forgive those who killed him.

So now I am plunged into the depths of sorrow. I am in such despair over his death. Yet somehow, somewhere deep inside, I hold on to the hope that the story isn't over. I simply refuse to believe that everything he sacrificed would have been in vain. I want so much to trust that God will find a way to bring him back, to show us all that Jesus truly was the Messiah, the Savior, that he was the light that the darkness could not overcome. That is all I can cling to right now. For if it is not a love so deep, a life so divine, a sacrifice so total that will save us, then I don't know what else possibly could. Amen.