

Lenten Series: "There's Something About Mary"

John 12:1-11

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If you're joining us for the first time this morning, today is the 5th Sunday in the Season of Lent. There's actually only one more Sunday in this season, which happens to be Palm Sunday, and then the season is over - giving way to Easter which is also a season in and of itself.

The preaching themes for next few Sunday are set. On Palm Sunday, preachers will preach on the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into the city of Jerusalem where the crowds gathered at the entrance and waved palm branches as He entered. Then on Easter Sunday, the day of the Resurrection, preacher will preach on how Jesus rose from the grave! So as far as preaching goes, the topics are already set for next two Sundays.

But what about today on the 5th Sunday in Lent? What is this Sunday known for? The Sunday before Palm Sunday - what's so special about today?

Well, according to the lectionary, the passage assigned for today is John 12:1-11, which is the story of when Jesus was Anointed at Bethany, and that is the story that comes right before the story of the Triumphal Entry.

Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. 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.

But one of the disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." 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.

"Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

Meanwhile, a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him.

Our story for today is told in all four of the Gospels - Matt, Mark, Luke and John, and in each of the gospels, the story is told a little bit differently.

In some gospels, they differ as to the location of where this took place. In other gospels, they differ as to where Mary poured out the perfume. Some say it was on Jesus' head, while others say it was on His feet. Then in some gospels, it mentions that the woman wet Jesus' feet with her tears, while in others, they only mention her hair. Finally, in some gospels, they don't even tell you what the woman's name was.

It's hard to know which gospel account was accurate in regards to all the details, but in John's version of the Anointing of Jesus, there are some interesting details, that are unique to his gospel account.

Well, whenever there's a Bible story that appears in all four of the gospels with slight variations, it can be fun for preachers to compare and contrast every single variation, but for this morning, I'm just going to stick with John's version of the story, and since John was an eye witness and was there when it happened, that gives his testimony a whole lot of credibility.

Now, John's version of the story puts our location in a city called Bethany. Bethany was just outside of Jerusalem on the road Jesus often travelled, and in that city there was a family that Jesus was very close to - the family of 3 siblings - Martha, Mary and Lazarus.

We know that Jesus visited this family at least on 2 prior occasions, the one where Jesus and Martha had that very famous conversation, and then a more recent one where Jesus brought Lazarus back from the grave!

Listen to how John 12:1 sets the context: *"It was 6 days before the Passover,"* which was one of the Jewish holy days, where all the Jews went to Jerusalem to observe the ritual, which explains why Jesus was in Bethany.

Jesus was on His way for His final week, Holy Week, but before all the chaos would ensue there's a private gathering at this family's home, and it's given *"in Jesus' honor."*

It was a private gathering among intimate friends. It was a moment to be together perhaps for the very last time - a moment to regale in the past few years, to recall all the miracles performed, all the places they visited, all the demons that were cast out, all the people who were healed, or at least to enjoy one last meal with friends around the table before the serious work of atonement would begin.

Some people have said that the Anointing of Jesus at Bethany is truly a story for the "senses" because in this story, there are "sights" that you would never forget if you saw with your own eyes and there are "smells" that only very few people get to smell in their lifetimes and then there are "sounds" and the things people said that were unforgettable.

Now, listen again to how John begins to tell the story of the Anointing of Jesus. in vs 1-2.

"Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner

was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him."

I love how John begins his version of the story by first addressing the "Elephant in the room!"

What am I talking about and what is the elephant in the room? Are you familiar w/that expression - the "elephant in the room?"

Well, there was an "elephant" in the room right there in verse 1. His name was Lazarus who was raised from the dead, and there he was reclining at the table right next to Jesus!

The Elephant in the room was that there was a man who just one chapter earlier was dead and already in the tomb, but there he was reclining at the table just like a normal human being.

Now I don't know how many of you have ever seen an "elephant" before at least up close and in real life, but they really are unique animals!

There's even a proverbial story about a group of blind men who all went up to touch an elephant, and each of those men touched a different part of the elephant and tried to describe what they touched.

I've never actually touched an elephant myself, but if I was in a room where there was a man who was brought back to life, you bet that I would want to touch him!

I would want to see for myself. I would want to touch for myself, something that no one had ever seen before and then after that I would have 100 questions that I would be asking Lazarus!

But oddly enough, the way that John tells the story, no one seems to be paying any attention to Lazarus. No one is asking him questions or poking his body and Lazarus himself doesn't appear to have anything at all to say!

Which is really puzzling to me, because in all of history, there was only one person who didn't have to wait until after the resurrection to experience conquering death and that was Lazarus!

Oh how I wish Lazarus would have said something there at the table!

There was something about Lazarus that stuck out like the proverbial "Elephant in the room." No one was talking about him or to him and Lazarus, wasn't saying anything either, and although this isn't the point of the sermon, if there are any of you who have experienced God working a miracle in your life, don't keep it to yourself - don't keep it bottled up sort of like how Lazarus did, but tell the world and everyone you know!

So John began our story by setting the context and by saying that there was this dinner held in Jesus' honor and then he addressed the elephant in the room by mentioning Lazarus.

Then there was Martha.

John didn't say a whole lot about Martha. In fact, he barely gave her an honorable mention and in vs 2, all he said was that "*Martha served.*"

While her brother Lazarus was reclining at the table, and while her sister Mary was getting ready for the surprise, there was Martha - going about her business carrying on and serving others.

Martha drew no attention to herself by taking up an issue with Jesus. There was no conversation about telling Mary to help, and so it would appear Martha was doing it all by herself.

Martha was probably the unsung hero of our story. She had no dramatic story to tell - unlike her brother, she had no dramatic display of love - unlike her sister would do. Martha was the quiet image of the one who probably kept this family together.

The way John told this story, it's almost as if Martha was invisible. If you're not looking for her - you probably wouldn't see her, and if you're not paying attention - you probably wouldn't hear her.

But Martha's testimony of her love for the Lord Jesus Christ may not be described with words, but by her quiet actions displayed in acts of loving service.

Then there was Mary.

Now, as I said early, this is a passage for the "senses." As for the sense of "sight" well, there was something that no one had ever seen before and that was Lazarus having been brought back to life!

But the sense that truly came alive in this passage had to be sense of "smell" because Mary was about to do something that no one would ever forget!

Mary was about to open a bottle of perfume - a very expensive bottle of perfume, and according to one of the disciples who knew about these things, that bottle of perfume was worth the equivalent of an annual salary.

Can we talk about this for a moment?

First of all, I'm out of my depth here and so I'm not speaking as an expert, but I think I know the smell of expensive perfume and perfume that is not! (Again - I am not an expert on this topic but let me share a story.)

Back in Jr. High school, there was a cologne that all the boys would wear, and that was Ralph Lauren's Polo that came in that green bottle!

I bet that just seeing this picture, you can smell it right now.



This is what all the boys wore back in Jr. High School - Ralph Lauren Polo Eau de Toilette Spray which goes for about \$50 / 2oz at Walmart.

Well, back in Jr High School, every single boy wore this cologne. It was like the official cologne of our school. Boys put it on before they came to school, they would reapply themselves during recess and breaks, and especially after P.E. they would shower in this stuff and it got to the point where people got really sick of it!

Apologies to anyone who owns a bottle of Polo. Apologies to anyone who has to smell it too. But Mary didn't open a bottle of Polo which everyone knows how it smells, she opened an Alabaster jar of pure nard, which cost thousands and thousands of dollars.

According to one disciple, that jar of perfume cost the equiv. of an annual salary, which means you didn't wear this to Jr. High School or put this on on a regular basis - you only put it on when you wanted to make a statement, and for the rarest of occasions.

John said that when Mary opened the bottle of perfume, the fragrance filled the entire house! So now - all the attention that was originally on Lazarus, was now redirected to the origin of the smell which was coming from Mary.

But instead of putting a little dab behind her wrist or a little touch on her neck, the passage said that Mary poured the entire bottle right onto Jesus' feet.

And then to add more drama to the story, then Mary let down her hair, got down on her feet and then she used her hair to wipe the perfume all over Jesus' feet!

Mary's actions just gave this Bible passage a "PG-13 rating" if not an "R" rating, because that was kind of provocative!

For example, could you imagine that during a worship service, someone who was not my wife, walked up behind me and started to run her fingers all through my hair?

You'd probably blush or look away or say something like "Oh Dear God, please tell her to stop!" Because people don't do those kind of things at least not in public!

But here was Mary who did something you don't see every day, she opened a jar of expensive perfume which you don't smell every day, then she poured it on Jesus' feet and used her hair to wipe them. I think at this point, it would be safe to say, the room fell silent because everyone was watching what was going on.

There was something about Mary that no one would ever forget and that was her "extravagant" display of love and her costly act of worship.

I read in interesting article this past week that talked about Mary's actions, and in that article, the author talked about the cultural / gender significance of Mary's actions.

And basically what she said was Mary wasn't supposed to do that and that it went against cultural norms, especially the part about how Mary let down her hair.

But then the author made a contemporary application. She said, we all need to learn how to "let down our hair" so to speak, and she meant that we should not have to worry about or what other people think about us, and to allow ourselves to be more free and not so rigid.

Like how at some churches where when you show up, you have to act like "every hair is in place" and everything is perfect, but when we are truly ourselves - transparent and vulnerable in front of a loving & accepting church, we can let down our hair and not have to pretend anymore.

So "let your hair down" St. Mark's! Come as you are, and if you want to touch my hair when we come back together - this pastor is here for you!

Let close with this story. Back in seminary, a group of us were invited to lead a Summer Youth Retreat all the way out in Alabama. It was a week-long youth retreat and a group of us were invited to help the local churches, to put the retreat together.

We provided the preachers, the music as well as counselors. The local churches in turn, brought their students, as well as their teachers and any parents as chaperones. I'm happy to share that the retreat was awesome. There were kids making decisions for Christ, there were students experiencing spiritual revival.

Well, on the last night we planned on having a campfire and we told all the students all week long, that at that campfire - they were to bring some kind of offering and dedicate it to Jesus. But the offering, we told them, wasn't to be a monetary offering, but rather a symbolic offering to represent their commitment.

So the final evening came and we were all at the campfire, and after a moving sermon by one of my colleagues about making a commitment to God, we then invited students to come up one-by-one and to place their offering in a box and to share what they offered.

A lot of students came forward and many of them wrote on a piece of paper, what they wanted to give to God. Then this one student came forward, and he had in his hand - a pencil, and as he put it in the box - he shared with all the others that what he was giving to God was his gift of creative writing, and wanted to use that gift to write stories for the Lord! (There was applause and approval from all the other students.)

Then another student came forward and her offering was really neat. She had fashioned from twigs that she cut from small trees, these little wooden bracelets and put them in the box. Then she shared that she wanted to go to fashion school and wanted to design things for God! She also drew a lot of applause and approval from her peers, and so into the night one-by-one, students kept coming forward.

Finally at the end when it looked like we were done, a shy and quiet young man walked up to the box, and then he rolled up his sleeve and showed everyone his watch.

Then he took off his watch and placed it in the box and then he told everyone "I don't have much to give, but I want to offer Jesus my TIME." And then just as quietly as before, he returned back to his chair as all the other students applauded.

So my friend said a closing prayer and dismissed all the students to return back to cabins to sleep, and as we were cleaning up and putting things away, we started to empty the box. There were a lot of pieces papers and things the students made and then there was that watch.

Well, when we took out the watch, we noticed it was rather heavy, and so, my friend pointed his flashlight to take a closer look and on the face of the watch, we gasped when we saw that this was a Rolex watch!

First of all - what was a student doing wearing a Rolex watch to a summer camp! What was he thinking!

So, we asked the counselors to bring that student back so we could return the watch to him, and this is what he said *"I really meant to give that watch as an offering, not only symbolic of my time, but literally as an offering too."* and he refused to accept it back.

Now - what were we going to do?

So we decided to bring it back to the church and give the watch to the pastor and let him decide what to do! And what we found out a few weeks later was that the watch was a gift that that was given to him by his father, and when the pastor called the father to return that watch to him, the father said, *"If that's what my son wanted to give to the Lord as his offering, who am I to take it back?"* (So somewhere in Alabama - there's an expensive watch floating around!)

But the point of the story isn't really about the watch, just like the story of Mary isn't really about the perfume, it's about an amazing love and an extravagant love that a person showed to Jesus.

I pray that as you go into this 5th week in the Season of Lent, you'll have an opportunity to give something to the Lord. Maybe it's a testimony. Maybe it's an act of service. Maybe it's a fragrant offering. Maybe it's your time, talent or treasures.

Whatever you give, may it bring honor to the Lord and bring glory to his Name.