

Scott Chrostek
Duke University Chapel
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A View from the Tomb

John 12:1-11

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 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."

When 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. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

A View from the Tomb

In today's gospel John includes a lot of detail as to context of this story. He first tells us of the location (We're in Bethany, a small town on the outskirts of Jerusalem), he tells us who's there, the participants (Martha, Mary, Lazarus, Judas and perhaps the other 11 disciples), he tells us of the participant's motives (Martha was cooking, Mary had some special perfume she wanted to share, Judas had a quarrel to pick about Mary's improper stewardship of precious resources, and Lazarus of course was hungry after having just been raised from the dead), and as if that wasn't enough, he also tells us the date and time. (It was Saturday night, around supper time.) In fact, the only thing we don't know is why John includes all of this particular information, but even still, that in itself speaks to us, because we know that since it's there, then it must be important...but important for what?

The twelfth chapter of John serves as the midpoint in this gospel. It precedes the more famous second half...the albeit better half, the half known as the Book of Glory or the Book of Passion. Most scholars even say that this twelfth chapter (and parts of the 11th as well) foreshadows all that is about to come, meaning that it alludes to Jesus' coming hour, his death and resurrection. Simply put, the twelfth chapter, and this lesson, points us toward all that happens during Holy week, this very week.

In just 8 short days from this Saturday in John's gospel (6 days for us) comes Easter. In 8 short days the stone will be rolled away, Jesus will have floated away, and everyone will be blown away by what has happened, except, that is, for Mary and Lazarus. You see, they were with him on this Saturday night in John's gospel, and between the two of them I am pretty sure that they had a pretty good idea of what was going to happen. They had stepped into the ordinary and seen the extraordinary.

When I first began to look at this passage, I couldn't get past the date and time. I don't know why, but something about the fact that this whole thing was taking place on Saturday night stuck with me. John says that, "Jesus came to Bethany six days before the Passover," which puts us into this scene as it happened on Saturday night.

Now, I won't claim know what goes through your heads whenever you hear the words 'Saturday night'...some of you might think about college football, some might think about date night with your spouse or significant other, you might be thinking about a party, while others of you (hopefully most of you) are thinking about church, and how it's only a few short hours away. Personally, I can't shake song lyrics...whenever I hear a reference to 'Saturday night,' I think about the Bay City Rollers (S-A-TUR-DAY Night!), or Elton John's (Saturday, Saturday!!), and maybe even Saturday Night Fever?!? (Night Fever, Night Fever!)...

Whenever Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and Jesus thought about Saturday night they probably thought about dinner, usually dinner with close friends and family, because that was the routine. Dinner on Saturday night was simply the tradition, eating a meal after Sabbath, once the sun went down, was what people did. It was nothing special, or so they probably thought, but my friends, this ordinary meal wasn't just any meal. It was special.

John says that after they gave him dinner, Mary went and grabbed a pound of very costly perfume, and then she proceeded to anoint his feet with her hair. In this single act she consecrates Jesus into royal service, into a death by which his saving sovereignty comes. My friends this was not an ordinary act, but John doesn't stop here...he goes on to mention that the fragrance coming from the perfume not only covered Jesus' feet, but it filled up the entire house, which implies that more than just a little perfume was used, more than just a foot-washing or an anointing was occurring here, and this is particularly interesting once we find that the perfume Mary uses is not any regular old expensive perfume. It was special too.

George Beasley-Murray writes that, Mary had kept this perfume, a family treasure, to embalm the body of Jesus. Now in biblical times, people used to embalm the deceased with a bottle of perfume. They prepared people for burial by breaking the neck of an alabaster jar, a flask, or sometimes even a pound of costly perfume. They would lay it beside the body, or at least near it, maybe even touching it in their tomb. The scent of the perfume would usually fill up the entire tomb with a sweet fragrance, hopefully enough to overcome the very stench of the lingering death.

Now John doesn't mention that Mary's perfume came packaged in an alabaster jar, but he does tell us that the fragrance from the perfume not only touched Jesus' feet, but filled the entire house. Like white smoke coming from a genie's lamp you can almost envision the perfume's fragrance pouring out into the room. At first you can only smell it, then you begin to feel it as you breathe it, until it's presence eventually grows and grows and grows overwhelming your senses, forcing you to close your eyes and cough, until poof...you're somewhere else, you're in a dream world, or in this case your in a dark cave on Saturday night, and Jesus is there. He's all alone. The crucifixion has taken place and the world is silent. Jesus is covered in a sweet fragrance and he is left only to perform his last saving sovereign act. My friends, this ordinary Saturday night dinner points us to the tomb; to this coming Saturday night. It gives us a view into the coming death and resurrection of Christ.

In this tomb we see new hope, the promise of eternal life, as “Lazarus, the one whom Christ first raised from the dead, is one with him at the table.” We see the responsive love of God and neighbor displayed in Mary’s humble wiping or washing of Jesus’ feet. We see the King of Kings anointed as such with perfume, costly perfume, and we even catch a glimpse of sin and death. However, in this tomb or by Jesus’ death, we discover that sin and death will not prevail. Sin and its impending death are indeed rebuked in this tomb as Jesus shouts, “Get back Judas!” “Leave her alone, Judas!” She bought this perfume so that she might keep it, so that she might reveal to all of us the extraordinary in her midst, which up until now you have treated as only ordinary.”

In his moving sermon yesterday, Dean Wells asked the congregation here to step out regarding our ordinary assumptions of power in order that we might begin to live according to the true power, a power made known through the fragile form of Jesus Christ. Dean Wells said, step out, but today I say, step in. My friends step into the ordinary events of your life. Get into the things happening around you, the events that take place around you this week, step into them as Mary stepped into her Saturday night dinner, seek out the extraordinary in your midst, seek out the signs of hope, the signs of life, the signs of Christ, and make them known to the others around you. Not by shouting! (Although that’s works) Not by singing! (That works too!) But by getting down on your knees, wetting your hair, and washing the feet of Christ as he stands before you and all around you. The extraordinary in the ordinary.

Amen.