

## Mary of Bethany's Story is a Feast for the Senses [OR No One Like Funerals]

John 12:1-8

Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on April 3, 2022

On a Sunday morning like most others, I was standing around in my home church's lobby (mysteriously called the narthex). Two people burst through the doors in tears. Our pastor happened onto the scene and guided them into his office. My imagination ran wild with whatever could have happened. Big emotions poured through those doors and out of their eyes. Later we found out that their beloved Australian shepherd had suddenly died. It was tough to make sense of their emotion. I wasn't raised with dogs and our Australian family dog, Romi, was very much alive and kicking and wreaking havoc. It wasn't until her diagnosis of cancer and her death a month later that the heartbreak made sense to us. Barb and Barney, our neighbors who we exchange dog-sitting with, brought over a small rose plant with fiery orange roses that matched Romi's fierce and sweet soul. I've long since planted it outside and every year Romi's rose blooms again around her death date in July.

Barb, Barney, and other sweet people taught me a lot about how to respond when other people's pets die. We had Romi cremated. It took a few months to figure out where to spread her ashes and we settled on the open space that she was notorious for adventuring through whenever she foiled our efforts to keep her in the yard. It was just Rob, me, and the kids. Each of us said something about Romi. One of us mentioned being grateful for her love of our family. And then I prayed. Our son instinctively found a large stone nearby, lugged it over, and plonked it on the spot. Then we walked back to the house.

Funny thing about Romi's death was how much it heightened other personal and professional losses in my life. As a 19-year-old brand new Registered Nurse, my first dear young patient died. Cherisse was 8 years old. She started sleeping most of the time, and with closed eyes she quietly whispered that I didn't smell good, her mom clarifying right away that it was because I didn't smell like perfume. Then 6-year-old Aaron. We called each other "Toots" and laughed a lot. My Dad died when I was 20 and my stepdad Pops died when I was 32. I'd been to many, many, many funerals before I started leading funerals as a pastor.

Remembering and grieving, gratitude and love, guilt and anger, and many other emotions both small and large tangle together when someone dies. Today's gospel

story from John poignantly paints these jumbled emotions. Jesus was visiting Lazarus, Mary, and Martha in Bethany six days before the Passover. Mary of Bethany was the one who had already cried once at Jesus' feet, after Lazarus had died but before Jesus raised him from the dead.<sup>1</sup> Lazarus' wild death-to-life story and the associated plot to kill Jesus are in the chapter just before our reading today.

In today's story, Jesus has returned to Bethany to be with his friends again. A special dinner was held in his honor. During dinner, Mary breaks open the nard – a fragrant, greasy ointment that my young patient Cherisse would have loved because it “smells good.” Nard, a pricey import from the Indian Himalayas, was used medicinally, and it was also used to prepare bodies for burial because of its strong fragrance. In Old Testament times, nard was burned as an incense offering to God by the Hebrew people.<sup>2</sup> It was a household treasure.

As Judas points out, it was worth a fortune. Mary opened the nard, “anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair.” Typical of John's gospel, there are layers to what is happening in the story. It's possible that Lazarus still smelled like nard from his burial because its scent lingers and lingers and lingers in the skin thanks to the oils in the ointment. Everyone in the home was reminded of recent events by the nard's unique fragrance swirling with the recent emotions of grief, gratitude, joy, guilt, anger, and God knows what else. As if the expense and the smell weren't enough, Mary's hair draped over Jesus' feet were another shock to the senses. The sight of her hair, the smell of the nard, the memory of death, the presence of life, and a death yet to come, made a many layered moment. The fragrance alone would be in her hair for weeks. To top it all off, Jesus was likely crucified and buried with the fragrance of nard still radiating from his feet through the skin and wounds inflicted there. Mary was simultaneously remembering Lazarus' funeral and preparing for Jesus' funeral with an excessive, fragrant celebration of life.

I don't know anyone who says that they like funerals (if I had a dollar for every time someone's told me that they don't like funerals...). Of course, no one likes funerals. Someone has died and that's awful. Funerals are reminders of other losses in our lives and our own mortality. That is difficult and disruptive. But their meaningful layers create a space to celebrate life. We celebrate the life of the

---

<sup>1</sup> John 11:32

<sup>2</sup> “What is pure nard in the Bible?” <https://religionandcivilsociety.com/catholics/what-is-pure-nard-in-the-bible.html>

person who died, and, by extension, we celebrate the gift of life. Funerals are a sacred pause even if we don't agree with whatever theology (or lack thereof) is framing them.

We attend some funerals because they're not optional. A close friend or family member dies, and we are supposed to be there. I invite you to think about attending funerals that seem optional. When your co-worker's mom dies, go. When your neighbor's daughter dies, go. When the person you sit next to in the pew but you don't know very well dies, go. There may be a lot of reasons why it's not possible to go to a particular funeral. But if it's possible, go. If it's not possible, ask how the funeral went, send a note, take a meal, or drop off a small rose plant.

The algorithm you create in your mind about how well you knew the person who died doesn't matter. I've never heard a deceased person's family wonder why someone else was at a funeral. I've only ever heard extreme gratitude and sometimes surprise from the family for everyone who's taken the time to be there. Funerals can feel awkward and quirky. Eulogies can go wildly awry. Sermons can be weird. And, at the same time, funerals can offer grace moments even when our own grief is dusted off to reveal our memories. We simply honor life by showing up when death happens.

That's kind of a good summary of Holy Week leading into Easter as well. We honor life by showing up after death happens. As did Mary of Bethany in this strange story about a fragrant dinner party. During Lent and especially Holy Week, we remember the baptismal promise of daily dying and rising with Christ – drowning our sin in the depths of forgiveness and grace unbounded. Like the fragrance of the nard, our baptisms are a reminder of death AND life. Our death and life. Jesus' death and life. All the promises, pain and joy that a life contains.

Next Sunday, a week from today, Holy Week begins with Palm and Passion Sunday – waving palm branches in celebration of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and hearing the story of his death in Luke's gospel; then comes Jesus' commandment to love each other along with Holy Communion on Maundy Thursday; and remembrance of his self-sacrificing crucifixion on Good Friday. We attend Jesus' funeral to celebrate and remember the life-giving cross, but ultimately, we attend the funeral in anticipation of Easter's empty tomb. Because the empty tomb is God's promise to us that, in the face of death, love and life are the last word.

Thanks be to God and amen.