

## Isaiah 43

**18** Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. **19** I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. **20** The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, **21** the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

**John 12:1-81** Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. **2** There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. **3** 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. **4** But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, **5** "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" **6** (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.) **7** Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. **8** You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

We're all more or less familiar with the gospel story I just read—a woman comes to Jesus and pours expensive oil over his head. Someone protests that the money could have been given to the poor, and Jesus says his strange saying about the poor always being with us. All four gospels have the story—which is unusual in itself. But there are differences in each gospel's version. We usually remember Luke's version—there the woman is crying, anointing Jesus' feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair. She cries in Luke, because she's a sinner and Jesus' forgiving her sins is the point of the story. But in John she is not crying, she is not, as far as we know, a sinner. So the story is not, here, about the forgiveness of sin. In which case—what is it about?

One thing this story is, is a classic example of the different roles assigned to men and women in scripture. The woman pours ointment over Jesus' feet (in John) and wipes it with her hair—what she does, she does with her body, and without words. The men, on the other hand, respond with words—Jesus and Judas debate—should she have done this? Was it good? Was it constructive? The woman does, and the men speak. That's a pretty typical division of labor in the ancient world. Men talk, men think, mental activities, and women do and are, physical activities. The physical body was the woman's province in those days, for good or ill, and this woman is no exception.

She anoints his feet—in Mark she anoints his head, actually, but John is the footwashing gospel. Why the feet? Maybe to distinguish this anointing from the anointing of kings by prophets—to say that this woman is not anointing Jesus for leadership, for kingship or priesthood, which would be done by pouring expensive oil over the head. Maybe the feet are John's way of reminding us that Jesus has indeed a physical body—he even has dirty feet like the rest of us. In anointing Jesus' feet, Mary tends to his physical body, maybe just as a ritual of hospitality or a gesture of comfort. But whatever Mary or the gospel writer assume the anointing is for, leadership or comfort or hospitality--Jesus understands the anointing to be for burial.

In the other gospels this woman is anonymous, just a woman with a jar of perfume. But in John, she has a name--this is Mary, sister of Martha and of Lazarus. Mary who has just seen her brother Lazarus raised from the tomb.

In just the previous chapter, Jesus has been weeping with this very Mary at Lazarus's tomb, the moment in John's gospel where Jesus looks the most human. Also the shortest verse in scripture, at least in English—Jesus wept.

In this gospel from the time Lazarus is resurrected, Jesus is on his way to his own death. The recognition of Jesus' power to raise from the dead, to restore the dead to life, means to his enemies that he does not belong in this world, that he must be killed. He is upsetting the order of things, and for that he has to die. His disciples do not seem to understand that fact. But Mary does. She was there, after all. She wept for her brother and smelled the stink of death coming from his tomb—she knows what Jesus overcame. In the movie *The Princess Bride*, the witch doctor agrees to try and bring a man back from the dead, because, he says, he's not so serious a case of dead. The witch doctor tells the dead man's friends, "He's only *mostly* dead." But Lazarus was not just mostly dead. He was dead dead—rotting and stinking already in the tomb. Mary knows how dead he was, and how Jesus raised him from the dead. So she knows who Jesus is and that is why she anoints him here. Whether she anoints him for leadership or for burial matters less when we realize that in John Jesus' mission is to die; his glory, his crowning, is the cross. His leadership and his burial are pretty much the same thing.

The psalmist says that those who sow in tears will reap rejoicing. I tried to imagine people sowing in tears. Who cries while they are planting seeds? Maybe those who spent their last dime on the seeds and are terrified to put the things into the ground, for fear of what may or may not happen to them there. Or maybe those for whom the planting is for some other reason hard to do, painful.

Mary, as I said, does not weep over Jesus' anointing. She prepares him for burial, sends him into the ground as a sower sends a seed, but she does not do her sowing in tears. Mary's tears were for her brother, because he got sick and died and she had no way of believing that there was anything else after that. Until it happened. Until he was raised from the grave. Maybe sowing in tears is like the way that Mary buried Lazarus. Something you don't realize is sowing at all, something you see rather as burial while you're doing it, and only later you understand was a planting. Later you see that what you thought was a corpse was in fact a seed, the preparation for an increase of life.

When we lose a loved one, a friend, when we lose a church member, or even, in my case, a whole church, we grieve. It would be inhuman not to grieve. After all, even Jesus wept at his friend's death. But when we have cried enough, when we have honored the loss with our tears, then we can be reminded that an empty place in our lives is an opportunity for God. I hold this aspect of our faith very dearly, since for me the death of my mother was in fact the beginning of my faith. The pain her death caused me sent me looking for meaning, and in time I found that the church was a place designed to help me, to comfort me and to aid me in my search, and that what I was looking for was in fact the Lord. My

life, such as it is, began again amidst that deep grief. That's not a good reason for my mother to die, don't get me wrong. There is no nice neat equation of good paying off the bad, erasing it. The grief is real and it remains, 30 years later. But when we live through grief, good things emerge, good things you could not have anticipated, good things that could not have been if you had not been through that bad time. We sow in tears, believing that we are burying ourselves when we bury our losses, our loved ones. But the Lord knows we are planting; growth and new life will come from just that empty place, because that is how God works. That is the miracle of God's grace, that all of us who sow in tears will bring in a harvest rejoicing. Amen.

You and I are not like Mary. We are not going to be so blessed as to see our loved ones, those we grieve and miss, stand up and walk out of the grave and back into our lives. But like Mary, we can come to understand that every one and every thing we lose in this life makes room for some new gift from God. The grief will always be a grief—nothing will change that except life in the hereafter.