

Lenten Stories: Resurrection Foreshadowed

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Luke 12:1-8

Her name was Ruth. She was married to my grandmother's brother, so therefore was my great aunt, on my mother's side. She died unexpectedly, or at least that's how I remember it, at an age younger than anticipated. Hers was the first funeral I ever attended; in fact, hers was the first dead body I ever encountered.

I was in grade school, I believe. Our family made the drive to Akron, Ohio, dressed appropriately. As much as I can remember, we went to the funeral home, where my great aunt's daughter-in-law, her son's spouse, took my hand and walked with me to the open casket. That's about all I remember, though I think now that my parents were visiting, consoling, the grown-ups.

The funeral was the next day, at an Episcopal church. I served as what I think was called a "crucifer," the one who entered the sanctuary with a cross – bronze perhaps – on a pole and placed it in a holder, and then carried it out at the end of the service. Again, memories are fuzzy, except when impressions become more than that.

I have seen many more dead bodies than that since then, of course. My four grandparents. My parents. Many, many church members, from much too young to quite old. I remember being in a room when someone has died, which may be the most profound experience a minister can have. Some of those bodies suffered – cancer, a heart attack, an accident of some sort. Some simply fell into the deepest sleep.

The rituals have changed significantly, even in the years that I have been doing this. Some of you will remember how it used to be. A person died. There was what we Protestants call a "visitation" at a funeral home, 2 or 3 days later. Oftentimes the family endured one very long funeral home session, or two slightly shorter ones. There was a funeral service the next day, with maybe a church reception afterward, until a funeral procession headed to the cemetery for a burial.

Nowadays, that is very rarely the pattern. Cremation has become – at least in our world – more the norm, a conversation for another day. The rise of cremation has led to the proliferation of scheduling options, now dictated as much by the convenience of a family’s schedule than anything else. Even before COVID, memorial services, rather than funerals, could happen weeks or months later, when everyone could “get there.”

Just to let you know, I will always be a proponent of sooner than later. To wait, in my mind, puts what used to be called the grieving process in a kind of limbo. I am also a proponent of missing things for a memorial, or missing most things, that it’s the most important thing.

But this is not intended to serve as a memorial service planning session. It is to get back to where we started, the body. And it is to begin to get to where we are headed. Maundy Thursday. Good Friday.

I am generally neutral on the matter of burial versus cremation, but I hope you think about it before the time comes. One thing we’ve lost, though, by the rise of cremation, is a connection between death and the actual body. Not to be morbid, but we’ve sanitized death a great deal, avoided thinking about the physicality of it, when a casket is absent from a service.

Some of you may know Thomas Lynch’s book, “The Undertaking,” from than a few years back. Lynch was a small-town undertaker and also an eloquent writer. Here is what he said about all of this: “...the meaning of life is connected, inextricably, to the meaning of death; that mourning is a romance in reverse, and if you love, you grieve and there are no exceptions-- only those who do it well and those who don't. And if death is regarded as an embarrassment or an inconvenience, if the dead are regarded as a nuisance from whom we seek a hurried riddance, then life and the living are in for like treatment.”

Lynch also wrote: “The bodies of the newly dead are not debris nor remnant, nor are they entirely icon or essence. They are, rather, changelings, incubates, hatchlings of a new reality that bear our names and dates, our image and likenesses, as surely in the eyes and ears of our children and grandchildren as did word of our birth in the ears of our parents and their parents. It is wise to treat such new things tenderly, carefully, with honor.”

Mary understood that.

Mary understood how much bodies mattered. Her brother, Lazarus, was dead. Truly, fully dead. Mary and her sister Martha had experienced the deep grief of loss, and more than that, they believed that their brother Lazarus would yet be alive had not Jesus taken his time to get to Bethany to save him. He was too late, so they thought, and they greeted Jesus with a mixture of worship and sadness and anger, to the point of being disconsolate. Jesus was so late, in fact, that the body, we are told, has begun its decomposition process.

Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. We don't get that story this year. We don't hear Jesus saying, "Unbind him," literally unbind him from his burial wrappings.

So Mary, with her sister Martha, knew. She knew that bodies mattered. Some days later, in the week before what we now know as Palm Sunday, Jesus comes to dinner at Lazarus' home. We wonder so much at that point, the dinner conversation, but we are offered no details. To play to the stereotypes that we have since constructed for these two sisters, Martha serves the meal, while Mary has a place at the table with Jesus, just as we will have a place at the table with Jesus in a few moments.

She then commits the most extraordinary act. We don't know if the poignant mixture of grief and gratitude led her to do it. We don't know if she knew what was coming, that is, that Jesus her Lord would soon face his own death but with no messiah to save him. We don't know. What we do know is that she took a pound of costly perfume and poured it on his feet, and then let down her hair and wiped his feet with her hair. We are told that the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. It is no accident we are told that, since we were just told that Mary's brother's decomposing body has the strongest of odors.

We don't know if hers was an act of gratitude for what Jesus had done, or an act of preparation for what was to come, what would happen to his body. Or both. We do know how extraordinary that act was.

Stephanie Perdew writes: "It is customary for a servant or host to wash their guest's feet upon arriving for a meal... It is customary to anoint the body of the deceased prior to burial...Mary enacts a spontaneous conflation of these rituals. Her rite is lavish, intimate, and sensual."

Chelsey Harmon writes: "Even the act of anointing Jesus' feet is symbolic. Whereas kings are anointed on the head, the dead are anointed on the feet as part of their preparation for burial. Did Mary know that Jesus was going to die soon, or was she proclaiming what she knew to be true: that Jesus is the one in

whom death becomes life—the conqueror of death? Perhaps it was both: that Jesus is the King who conquers death and he is preparing to die as part of establishing his Kingdom. Did Mary understand the paradox that God planned to defeat death and evil once and for all by willingly submitting to death—an act the world was invited to witness and participate in?”

There is a moment that follows that could become a whole other sermon, not that you want a two-for-one deal this morning. Judas criticizes Mary and her act as one of reckless extravagance. You could have taken the money you used to pay for that perfume and given it to the poor, he says. Perhaps for a moment that does not seem unreasonable, as we even now criticize multi-billionaires who engage in space travel. Perdue calls it a “calculus of care.” But only for a moment.

First of all, Jesus will have none of it. He quickly and summarily dismisses Judas’ concern. We who know Judas’ fate will know his concern to be disingenuous anyway.

Jesus then says something about always having the poor with you. Scholars have long struggled with those words. Does that mean we should accept poverty, that we shouldn’t try to alleviate poverty, or that our efforts are in vain? Not at all. “You always have the poor with you,” Jesus says. But he goes on, speaking to Mary’s motivations. “...but you do not always have me.” “Jesus commends Mary’s spontaneous love,” Perdue writes, “ritualized and embodied and enacted now. It is not profligate but prophetic.”

The body matters. It always has. From the outset, at the heart of our faith has been this notion, incarnation, that God became human, a human body, and lived with us, to bleed and sweat and cry with us and for us. This was not a mirage, a ghost, a somehow more-than-human body. That would make incarnation something other than incarnation.

“Lift High the Cross,” we will sing in a bit. But before it is lifted, it is dragged through the city, and used as a means of torture and execution. Jesus knew what was coming, and so did, in her own way, Mary.

Anna Case-Winters writes that “the divine embodiment in incarnation is surely an embrace of embodiment, which invites us to think differently about bodies.” (“God Will Be All in All,” pages 81-83) There is an ethical demand, therefore, as Case-Winters writes, to think about bodies, human bodies, in terms of domestic violence, mass incarceration, human trafficking. Case-Winters writes that “An

incarnational ethic insists that bodies matter and that bodies under threat require advocacy and action on our part.”

Mary’s act was many things.

It was an act of gratitude, to be sure, gratitude hard wrought from the experience of her brother.

- It was an act of devotion and worship, she and her sister, as the women so much more than the disciples ever could comprehend grasped the essence of Jesus’ vision and ministry.
- It was a prophetic act, an act that foreshadowed what was to come for the one she followed do devotedly.
- It was a compassionate act, even in advance, of care for the body that would suffer, even death on a cross.

Gratitude. Worship. Prophetic. Compassion. All those things to which we are fully called.

We will gather at this table in a moment or two. We will break bread and pour out a cup. This is my body, he says. And however symbolically we understand that now, we know that his incarnation, and his death, was no mere symbol.

Bodies matter, in our faith. We are the body of Christ, we affirm. That is true for my great aunt, for every body beaten by an act of hatred, for every bullet-invaded body in Sacramento, for every healthy body and every suffering one, for every trans body, for every Ukrainian body and every body of a Philadelphia neighbor who has little to eat or no place to sleep.

Jesus’ body – his incarnation – is the surrogate for every human body, and in the ways we respect and have compassion for every human body, we do it to him. Amen.