

Readings:  
Isaiah 43:16-21  
John 12:1-8

### **Faith Looking Forward**

“Laura writes It was almost three years ago. I sat across from Pastor Heather beneath a vast expanse of glass looking out over early summer trees in Northwest DC. My mouth could barely shape the words of my confession - a nasty divorce, guilt for my children and for my life image abandoned, guilt about those I had disappointed, guilt about the new life I was seeking, fear for my future - and a clear sense that God was present in it all. Her response changed my confession of faith in an instant. "Gives resurrection a whole new meaning, doesn't it?"

*Yes. It sure does. New life from certain death. Breath regained after sure asphyxiation. Ashes, dust, sprouts.*<sup>1</sup>

Lent brings us face to face with the journey of life and death. Lent calls us to look into our darkest times and places and imagine God calling us out of those. Like those who dream says the prophet Isaiah.

This is the last Sunday of lent which means we are getting very close to the time in our liturgical year where we face one of the darkest moments in history. And yet here we are. Called to new life? Challenged to consider restoration? Or more vivid than that resurrection - life rising up out of death.

Intellectually, these are incompatible notions. We just don't think that way. Few of us willingly look towards a dark time and realize that resurrection - more life will come out of it. That is not until we have faced a time like Laura. (*I shared a story of a friend who is struggling with cancer right now who is finding her eyes opened to the gifts she has in herself and others*) Or Abraham, or Moses, or Paul, or Lazarus. God's covenant offers delivery from death to life again and again, in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we see the pattern and possibility. And surely...surely we see the pattern in our own life experience.

The prophet Isaiah shares God's promise to "do a new thing."

And although the exiled community to which Isaiah spoke had seen a great deal of destruction. They knew the hopes and and miracles experienced by their ancestors. And perhaps they are sensing a new opportunity. Perhaps they recognized the Holy presence alongside them, preparing to do a new thing.

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<sup>1</sup> matt & laura norvell 2010 [www.settingourstones.org](http://www.settingourstones.org)

Perhaps they began to imagine the unimaginable.

Or maybe like the Philippians they have begun to grasp Paul's message calling us to recognize what God has given us and participate in bringing new life to faith and community. Paul suggests we focus on future not on past. To press towards the goal of abundance. He reminds us that life is not only about mountain top experiences it is real and sometimes it is even just mundane. But if we do not keep persistence, if we do not constantly keep our eyes open to the possibility of more we will not experience fullness. We will not grow and expand and live into the promise we as people of faith are called to.

Ask every athlete from the Paralympics if every day they thought they could reach the goal. Ask them if every day was easy, or even if every day was hard. Then ask them what kept them going. God calls us to be people of the resurrection, people of fullness of life, people of abundance. People who dream of what is to come, and yet we only get out of life and faith what we put into it.

That brings me to our gospel story. A story similar to last week. One that works with a different economy. Most of us I think understand Judas' response to Mary pouring out the costly burial perfume. And although John makes the point that Judas' motive was more about the opportunity to take the money for his own we still think it should go to the poor and not be wasted on being poured out on Jesus' feet.

But Mary and Martha are engaging in the fullness of life they have experienced in the presence of Jesus. Martha provides a feast for her brother and Jesus while Mary anoints Jesus honouring him in life. Mary is rejoicing in the gift of life he has shown her not only in raising her brother but in showing her how to live.

Perhaps part of Judas' struggle is he doesn't know what to do with people of abundance. Sometimes it is very difficult to know that someone else has found joy in "good news" that we can hardly bring ourselves to believe and embrace. Perhaps Judas doesn't know what to do with the disciples that get it. He doesn't know what to do with those who are living in hope and looking forward. Mary seems to understand somehow that if Jesus can raise Lazarus from the dead there must be more. We must have had our eyes closed to all that God can do. If God can bring her brother to life, what can he do for all of us?

It seems to me this story is really about discipleship. Mary and Judas contrast true and false discipleship, and true and false love.

Mary displays discipleship by doing exactly what Jesus will do for his disciples at the last supper? She provides the model of discipleship Jesus calls us to. To feed and wash one another's feet. She lives out expressions of relationship and love.

Mary takes a dark moment and replaces it with a moment of anointing life. She does not seem too concerned with what others think, she has decided to put her love and appreciation on display. She banishes the aroma of death and replaces it with anointing oil.

It is hard to imagine what that Bethany gathering would have been like. The smell of death would have been replaced by the smells of baking bread, roasted calf and all the fixings of a marvelous feast. The mood would have been joyous with the life of Lazarus but somber with the return of Jesus and the knowledge of the danger they are in.

We can't ignore the dark moment the here. Mary does not anoint Jesus as King, she anoints him for burial. Mary is looking forward, not wanting to miss the opportunity to show love and devotion and discipleship.

I imagine that from that moment on whenever any of those present smelt fragrant oil it was this moment that came to mind, that grabbed them. The moment when Mary lavishly poured out love on the one who have given them the gift of love with his life. "The smell of death has been with these friends, but Mary shows us that God's persistent love smells even stronger, and that it will triumph in the defeat of Jesus' death."<sup>2</sup>

So although we may understand Judas' charitable logic we should also recognize that it resembles a rigorous, unyielding piety that cannot stomach a wild love like Mary's. "Acts of true grace and love regularly get slandered as deviance."

So, Mary's lavish devotion directly contrasts Judas' critical stinginess. She is giving herself and us permission to honor God, Jesus and others in extravagant ways.

I wonder how often we honor God and others in extravagant ways in ways that others might look sideways at? We may do that by giving to the poor, offering care or money to those in need. Praying for a friend or making yet another prayer shawl or plate of food. We may honor God and others by attend church each Sunday or taking time to meditate and pray. Discipline however is not discipleship. We are called to give and live generously in the hope that God has something more to come.

We as individuals and as a community of faith might even be called to live into our dreams. We might even be called to put into practice our belief that God has a purpose for us. We only get

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<sup>2</sup> Skinner, Matt workingpreacher.org

out of the journey what we put into it. Are we going to be Mary or Judas? Are we going to dream of new life and possibilities like the prophets call us to? Are you going to embrace the story of our resurrection faith and anoint it with all you have or are you going hold on tight to that which is dying? Perhaps this is our final lenten challenge - to look forward to new life. May our eyes be open to the God-given promise.