

## HOPE IN HOPELESS TIMES

Lainie Murrell, Deacon Postulant

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

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God of our hearts, may the written and spoken word lead us to the Living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Today's readings tell us something about how to find hope in hopeless times. There's no doubt that we've lived through times that seem hopeless in recent years. I was talking with a group of women last week and the conversation went from war to pandemic to inflation to homelessness and back to war. Someone pointed out that at least in Lent we have our forty days and then Easter comes. Easter always comes. But even in the broader world beyond the church year, we have the hope of Easter, even in the depths of suffering and austerity and pandemics.

Now as we near the end of Lent and look ahead to Palm Sunday, the Lord says in Isaiah, "I am about to do a new thing... I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." The Psalm tells us that those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. Paul tells us that in spite of suffering, he presses on toward the prize. And finally, Mary anoints the feet of Jesus with the beautifully scented nard and celebrates him and her brother's return to life even as her actions foretell the coming death of Jesus. You may notice that all these readings involve celebrations tied to suffering. Weeping turns to joy but weeping still happens.

I have to tell you, I am one of those people who cannot watch awkward and embarrassing things on television and in movies—those things that make you cringe. I have to skip comedies if they are the kind where the main characters are constantly doing things that give me secondhand embarrassment for them.

I try to consider this a strength related to empathy, but it may be more the weakness of someone who has done very embarrassing things in their own life. I still cringe at that time I forgot my line for a full 30 seconds in the 9th-grade play. I stood there like a deer in the headlights trying to figure out what came next. I also cringe at awkward drama or tense conflicts in a story. I'm the person peeking behind my fingers when things get tough. I feel that if I had been at the dinner party in today's gospel story, I might have cringed at the part that we are told about.

First, consider Mary—what a beautiful soul.

We have seen Mary and her sister Martha before—Martha was the one who was fussing over her to-do list while Mary was sitting at the feet of Jesus absorbing his teachings. These sisters are witnesses to Jesus raising their brother from the dead. Mary is a devoted and loving disciple of Jesus. It is likely that, with a heart full of the return of her brother, she goes above and beyond expectations to pour out love upon Jesus. She literally pours out the expensive perfume on his feet and then wipes it with her hair. This is the first part that I would have been uncomfortable watching. Can you even imagine? I have a feeling I would have been one of those people at the table sort of looking away awkwardly. How embarrassing—she's pouring this stuff on him, wiping with her hair? I just can't even look.

Then we may cringe again when Judas speaks up. Oh, can't we picture a fussy church member at this moment? You know the one. The one who says, "We can't do that, it's not appropriate; there are better ways to spend the church money. You're doing it wrong. We've never done it that way before." Is there anything more Episcopalian than that phrase? "We've never done it that way before."

The complaint from Judas was a tense moment. He is fussing about this display of embarrassingly extravagant love. Perhaps he was cringing not only at the extravagance but at his knowledge of his forthcoming betrayal.

Through all this awkwardness and tension, Jesus sides with extravagant love. His response has sometimes been taken to mean we should not help the poor, which, honestly, would make no sense coming from Jesus. The people with him would have likely recognized that he is referring to Deuteronomy 15:11. The unspoken second half of the sentence that begins with "You will always have the poor with you" is "I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'"

Regardless, Jesus recognizes the extravagant love born out of both gratitude and grief that Mary is offering with her lavish and expressive gift. Perhaps she has realized that in raising her brother from the dead, Jesus has signed his own death warrant. It's what John tells us in the previous chapter—that when news spreads of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, the leaders in Jerusalem decide Jesus is a danger to their power.

There is hope, but there is also weeping. Like so much of Lent, we are solemn, we are awaiting the cross, but we are also awaiting the joy of resurrection. In the midst of this awkward celebratory dinner party, there is an ironic mix of anointing being both for burial and for kingship. I think there was a reason John mentions the raising of Lazarus at the beginning of this passage. He wants to specifically remind us of it, even though it was just in the last chapter. Recall that when Jesus asked them to roll away the stone from the grave, Martha commented that there was a stench of death. Now we have this beautiful fragrance in contrast, but a fragrance that could be used to anoint a dead body.

Again, the irony is that while ancient peoples anointed dead bodies with perfumed oil, they also anointed kings. In fact, the word Christ is a Greek translation of the Hebrew word for Messiah, which means the Anointed One. It's central to who Jesus is as Christ.

As we know, Jesus is not like the kings of this world. In their book, *The Last Week*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan describe how, while Jesus was making his triumphal entry into Jerusalem that we will celebrate next week, Pilate was very likely entering on the other side of town. Pilate lived elsewhere in more comfortable digs than he could find in provincial Jerusalem, but he would come to town for important Jewish festivals, partly to bring reinforcements to keep the locals from getting any rebellious ideas and to demonstrate the power of Roman domination.

Pilate's procession represented the Roman Empire, in all its pomp and circumstance. There would be no humble colt or poor folks laying down palms and cloaks on the ground. It would be glittering with metal and gold, full of horses and weapons, and banners symbolizing all the empire, wealth, and violence of Rome. In contrast, Jesus is a prince of peace and turns the idea of the kingdom upside down with his love for the poor, healing the sick, and teaching love, forgiveness, and that the last shall be first.

How could this humble teacher pose a real threat to the powers of Rome or even Jerusalem? How could his followers find hope in such hopeless times? How do we find hope in such hopeless times?

Well, our hope lies in the Anointed One, the Christ who laid down his life for us, but also told us how he was anointed. Back on the third Sunday of Epiphany, we had a Gospel reading that told us what I like to call the mission statement of Jesus. He stood up in his hometown synagogue and read:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Then he said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

**Y’all. Listen.**

He told us what his anointing was. It is indeed what Jesus went on to make the focus of his ministry—to bring good news to the poor, to tell the captives they are free, to proclaim sight to the blind, to free the oppressed, and to proclaim the Lord’s favor.

And to me this is where we find hope in hopeless times—we go on to continue his ministry. We bring good news of God’s love, we help the imprisoned, the disenfranchised, the refugees, the hurting. We speak out against the empires and tyrants of this world. We protest corruption. We tear down systems of injustice. We speak out on behalf of those who can’t be heard. And we go ahead and open our hands to the poor and needy.

But you know what we **don’t** do if we seek hope in hopeless times? We don’t suppress those who love extravagantly. We don’t silence mouths filled with laughter and tongues with shouts of joy that proclaim God’s love. We don’t tell people “We’ve never done it like that before” when what they are proposing could bring new life. God is always doing a new thing. When he makes a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert, we would do better to follow that way and build a boat to navigate those rivers.

We don’t get in the way of the love of God but jump in and join the good work. That’s how we find hope in hopeless times—in the good work of the Kingdom that Jesus showed us.

May we go forth and do the good work of the kingdom of God.