

“Prelude to the Resurrection”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
March 25th, 2007
Scripture: John 12:1-8 and Isaiah 43:16-21

Have you ever been to an awkward dinner party? You think you are going over to a friend’s house for a casual occasion and then, right as you ring the doorbell, you see inside and see a stack of gifts set on the table right inside the door, and you are not even sure what occasion the gifts are to celebrate. Or maybe some wine was served with appetizers, and then, just as people sit down for dinner, one of the guests says something incredibly rude, but unfortunately true, about someone else at the event. And since dinner has just begun, the rest of the night is covered with an awkward fumbling for safe conversation. Or maybe you have attended a dinner, and as one half of the table is sharing a joke and people are laughing, someone seated at the opposite end quietly announces that the cancer is back and they don’t expect to eat many more meals like this. Have you ever been to an awkward dinner party? Once you realize what is happening you wish you could simply leave, but instead, you cannot erase what happened from your memory.

The Bible tells about just such an awkward dinner party. An extravagant gift was presented out of the blue. People’s motives were questioned out loud. There was the little matter of a man in attendance, Lazarus, who had been dead not too long before and brought back to life. And finally, at the heart of the extravagant action is a foreboding sense of impending death. Jesus, a “dead man walking,” to use the phrase for prisoners about to be executed, at a dinner party with a recently dead man, and a woman who wants to anoint his feet with costly ointment.

Let me invite you to step up to the Dining Room window and look inside. As we peer through the dining room windows into this awkward dinner party, where do we begin? Let’s look from chair to chair, and see who is at this dinner. We don’t know how many people were there, but several in attendance are named, and we’ll deal with each one.

First, Martha. Now you may remember another story from the Bible that features the sisters Mary and Martha hosting Jesus at a meal. And while Jesus taught, Mary sat at his feet and Martha, Luke tells us, was distracted by many tasks.¹ So as we peek into this dinner party, we see that Martha didn’t even leave a chair for herself; instead, she rushed around serving people, bring out more platters of food, refilling glasses, and being busy with hosting responsibilities. There’s Martha.

Then there is Lazarus. Looking remarkably good after spending four days dead and buried in a tomb. You may recall what happened in that earlier story. Lazarus had taken ill while Jesus had been off in a different region. So Mary and Martha, his sisters, had sent word to Jesus to come quickly, to do something, anything, to make him better. Instead, Jesus lingered where he was for a few days. And arrived after Lazarus had been dead and already in the tomb

four days. What happens next is an interesting and somewhat complex story – you can go home and read it for yourself in chapter 11.

Long story short is that Martha and Mary separately approach Jesus and say, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Jesus told Martha, “Your brother will rise again.” And, in an interesting note for us as we approach Easter, Martha says, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” But Jesus isn’t willing to make Lazarus (or Mary and Martha) wait that long, so he goes to the outside of the tomb and calls out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” And out came Lazarus, still bound in burial clothes.

Now Lazarus is looking pretty happy sitting in his chair. Food probably never tasted that good. Can we blame him for sitting there laughing and smiling, thinking that all would end happy ever after?

Then there is Mary at the next chair, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. She is doting on Jesus, her face intent so as not to miss a single word. And then suddenly she gets up from her chair, and goes to the mantle, and as she breaks open a pound of obviously expensive perfume, the house fills with the fragrance. We can smell it even out here. And then she comes back to the table, and does something so extravagant, something so beautiful and loving. She turns Jesus’ chair around, and takes his feet in her hands, and anoints them with the perfume, and then wipes his feet with her hair. It is so extravagant and unexpected that it makes everyone uncomfortable.

At the next chair is Judas, clearly bothered and annoyed at Mary’s act. John tells us, in case we haven’t skipped ahead to the ending of the gospel, that Judas was one of Jesus’ disciples, the one who was about to betray him. John also tells us that he was a thief who kept the common purse for the disciples but used it for his own purposes. Knowing all that about Judas, we have little sympathy for his attempt to put Mary in her place. “Why was this perfume not sold . . . and the money given to the poor?”

And finally, there is Jesus. His feet are still stinging from the perfume that made it into the cracks and blisters on his soles. Touched by Mary’s act of kindness, and saddened by what he could see coming his way.

Deep in this season of Lent, week by week we get a stronger sense that our stories of Jesus will not have a typical ending. This is no fairy tale. This is not a feel-good romantic comedy where all works out in the end and everyone has a charmed life for ever and ever.

Week by week in Lent, we see trouble brewing on a horizon that is drawing near. Two weeks ago we heard of conflict between Herod, the fox, and Jesus, who was willing to spread his wings like a mother hen in defense.² Last week we saw conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees.³ This week, conflict has spread to the Dining Room table, to Jesus’ inner circle, and the hints of betrayal are no longer just hints. John tells us, in case we were deaf to what was happening, that Judas Iscariot was the one who was about to betray him.

If Jesus is to remain true to himself, true to his God, true to his ministry of healing and teaching and his proclamation that God's kingdom was so close, closer than our breath, close enough to touch, we know this story will not have a sappy, happy ending.

After Mary's act and Judas' self-righteous response, no one is sure what else should be said at this awkward moment. It is Jesus who finally speaks after Judas tried to put Mary in her place. "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me" (John 12:7-8).

Let's see, Martha, Lazarus, Mary, Judas, Jesus – is that everyone? There is one more person at this awkward dinner party. And that is the person standing outside, peering into the living room window watching what is going on. It is the person hearing the story. The final person at this dinner table is, well, you.

For Lent is not just about Jesus. Lent is a time to remember the integrity with which Jesus lived and died, but it is also a time to reflect on what we must and will endure as well. In this Lenten story, we know that we will encounter our own crosses and suffering as we walk.

In this story of an awkward dinner party, we realize that there will be awkward moments for us as well. For as we hear this story, as we truly hear it and see what is going on, we realize that faith in Jesus does not equal worldly success. It is an awkward moment as we realize that faith in Jesus does not equal power. That faith does not equal wealth.

It will not be easy for you, the last person at the dinner table. For if you want to walk with Jesus, if you want to follow him, you start to smell that the perfume rubbed so lovingly on his feet is starting to smell like the spices that will be used at his burial.

As we start to realize the cost of following Jesus, and the background grows darker, and the soundtrack more ominous, even now, we begin to hear notes of a prelude to the resurrection. A prelude to the resurrection. An ancient memory that when all looks lost, God makes a way. An ancient story of a tribe of slaves who made it through the waters and into the promised land while those in hot pursuit were quenched like a wick. The resurrection prelude sounds note that give hope to individuals (like Lazarus) and to whole communities (like the people passing from slavery into freedom thru the Red Sea).

No, a life lived trying to follow Jesus will not be easy. An authentic life of faith will bring its share of trials and tribulations. As Mary and Martha grieved Lazarus' death, Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). "I am about to do a new thing," God said to Isaiah. "I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert" (Isaiah 43:19). And may those promises carry us. May that faith carry us through all our circling years. May that faith carry us all the way to Easter. Amen.

¹ See Luke 10:38-42. It is not clear that these two stories are remembering the same event, since there are significant differences. I acknowledge that I am going beyond the details of John's account in not giving Martha a chair at the table. (But for that matter, they were not likely sitting at chairs, but reclining while eating.)

² Luke 13:31-35, see <http://www.cpcstpaul.org/sermons/2007/031107.pdf>

³ Luke 15:1-10, see <http://www.cpcstpaul.org/sermons/2007/031807.pdf>