

I grew up with many stories about people dying. Some of those stories were difficult and heartbreaking, and some were beautiful and inspiring. One that always stuck out to me was the story of my great Uncle Nick who died of cancer in 1984. When he was on his deathbed, one of his children took off his glasses to make him more comfortable. Uncle Nick said, "Leave my glasses on. When I meet Jesus, I want to see him clearly!" By faith, Uncle Nick was able to see through the veil of death with acceptance and even joy. It's one of the most beautiful ways I can imagine dying.

But we don't often associate those words in our minds, do we? Death and beauty. We live in a death-denying culture. We obsess over youth and admire people who never seem to age. Why are we so afraid of looking our age? I realize with my mussed-up hair style that I am talking to myself right now. I think our fear of aging is tied up with our fear of death. When we see bodies age, it reminds us of the inevitable reality that we all face, that our life is limited and no one gets through life without dying, not even Jesus. The question is, will we accept that reality or deny it?

It's six days before the Passover, and Jesus has just raised his good friend Lazarus from the dead. If you think Paul Rudd is cheating death, he ain't got nothing on Lazarus. After witnessing Jesus do the impossible, the religious leaders know this is a power that must be stopped. If religions and governments can no longer count on the threat of death to control their people, then the jig is up. And if you were Jesus' disciples and you witnessed this kind of power, then suddenly your dreams of overthrowing the religious and governmental leaders seems within your reach. When you have a weapon of this magnitude on your side, then anything is possible. The stakes are high, and tension is in the air. The very next day, Jesus will enter Jerusalem, and tonight his friends host a dinner in his honor. Lazarus is there, fresh out of the tomb, while his sister Martha serves the meal, while Mary does something no one expected.

Now, it's important that we keep our Mary's clear. This is Mary of Bethany, not Mary Magdalene, nor Mary the mother of Jesus. These are 3 different people, though it's easy to confuse them. Neither Mary of Bethany nor Mary Magdalene were prostitutes. Nowhere in the New Testament are either of these women ever called prostitutes. Yet, how many of you have heard that somewhere along the way? Me too. But it's not true. So how did we all come to hear this rumor if it's not true? Our best guess is that in a desire to discredit these incredible women, these models of faith, these apostles to the apostles, a rumor was started to take them down a notch. Strong, competent women often intimidate men. So, smear campaigns emerge to put women in their place as either objects of male desire or baby makers. But Mary of Bethany is not a man's object, nor did she have children as far as we know. Is it any surprise that she made a lot of men insecure?

John tells us, "Then Mary took an extraordinary amount, almost three-quarters of a pound, of very expensive perfume made of pure nard. She anointed Jesus' feet with it, then wiped his feet dry with her hair. The house was filled with the aroma of the perfume." Now, if you were a guest at this dinner, what would you be thinking? How would you respond? Last week, we witnessed a shocking display at the Academy Awards, where one person touching another in public caused both shock and outrage. In this story, Mary touches Jesus as well. While there is no violence involved, it's still shocking, is it not? The feet are intimate, personal. For someone to touch your feet is not a mere pat on the back, or even an extended hug.

Imagine someone doing this to you. How would you feel? My guess is that many of us would say, “Stop! This is out of line!” Of course, no one should touch you without your consent—ever. Kids, I want you to hear this from your pastor. If anyone touches you, another child or adult, and you’re not comfortable with it, what do you do? You say no, and then tell a trusted adult. Adults, the same goes for you. All of us should feel empowered to speak clearly when our boundaries are crossed. Thankfully, Mary has Jesus’ consent, as he makes clear.

Why does Mary do this? This perfume cost a year’s worth of wages, as Judas observes. What would you be willing to spend that kind of money on for a present? Mary’s gift is lavish, brazen even. She boldly and without shame pours this perfume on Jesus’ feet and wipes his feet with her hair. If you’re going to spend that kind of money, why not get Jesus something practical, like maybe a time share on the coast or one of the new chariot models all the Romans are talking about? Mary is not interested in practicality, and while Judas shames her, self-righteously saying it should have been spent on the poor, Jesus praises her saying, “Leave her alone. This perfume was to be used in preparation for my burial, and this is how she has used it. You will always have the poor among you, but you won’t always have me.”

That last line about the poor always being among you has been cited as an excuse for Christians not to give to those in poverty, but that’s a complete misunderstanding. The line, “the poor you will always have among you” is a citation of Deuteronomy 15, which says if there are poor among you, do not be tightfisted but open your hand wide to them and be generous. God is a generous God, who does not hold back but offers prodigal grace and blessing to all creation. When we live and give generously, we reflect our divine image. Jesus’ whole life is a lavish gift to the poor. Mary gives lavishly, and we are invited to do the same.

After Easter, we will move into our stewardship campaign, where you will be asked to give to the ministry of this church and all the ways we support those in need. I was at a board meeting last week for COMPASS, which is a rental assistance ministry out of Broad Street Presbyterian Church, and Covenant is a key sponsor of their work. Through your generous giving, COMPASS helped prevent thousands of families from homelessness in Columbus in 2021. This is one of the many ways your giving to Covenant helps those in need, so when the time comes, I hope you’ll give generously.

But for Mary, the cost of the gift is secondary. While everyone else in the room is dreaming about the revolution they think Jesus is going to bring in Jerusalem, Mary accepts the reality that Jesus is going to die. Instead of denying it or wishing that hard truth away, she accepts it. Her gift is the expression of that acceptance. Learning to accept death is one of the greatest gifts faith can give us. Of course, none of us want to die, not even Jesus. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he will ask God to take this cup from me. He wanted to live, but he accepted the reality that we all will one day face. Not my will, but yours be done, O God. His life will be poured out like sweet perfume, bringing death into the life of God. Because he did, we don’t have to fear death or deny it. Instead, we learn to accept and even befriend it.

Here’s reality: our time here is limited. You will not always have your loved one here with you. That’s what makes our time together so precious. Death comes for us all. No amount of exercise or dietary supplement or hair product can change that, and that’s OK. It’s a beautiful gift to entrust ourselves and those we love to God. The opening question of the Heidelberg Catechism states: What is your only comfort, in life and in death? A. That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost

of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me. Here is reality: you belong to Christ both in life and in death, and nothing can separate you from his love. So, when that day comes, keep your glasses on, because you will want to see Jesus clearly.